

At the Margins of the Storm: Mainstreaming LGBTI+ Rights in Climate Change Strategies



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About Kaleidoscope Trust

Kaleidoscope Trust is a UK-based international charity fighting for a future where LGBTI+ people everywhere can live free, safe and equal lives. We are building a global movement to create this world for LGBTI+ people everywhere.

We work with political leaders in the UK and beyond to ensure global LGBTI+ issues are a priority. We ensure that activists have the resources, skills, and training they need to learn from one another in order to create an enabling environment and change hearts and minds. We bring together grassroots organisations with those in power to create that change.

Kaleidoscope Trust is a founding member of The Commonwealth Equality Network

(TCEN) and provides the operational and financial base for the network's Secretariat as its host. We have engaged in Commonwealth processes and with Commonwealth institutions, as a priority, for over a decade in support of our shared objectives with TCEN's other members.

We also host the Secretariat to the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global LGBT+ Rights, which emerged from the Parliamentary Friends of Kaleidoscope Trust, established in 2013. Kaleidoscope Trust was also a civil society co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition from 2019-2022 and is a founding member and former co-chair of the UK Alliance for Global Equality.

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Introduction

Climate change is an existential threat to global society. Between 2030 and 2050, it is expected to cause an estimated 250,000 deaths per year from climate-related issues such as undernutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.¹ Furthermore, the direct damage costs to health (excluding costs in health-determining sectors such as agriculture and water and sanitation) is estimated to reach between US\$ 2-4 billion per year by 2030.² Yet, while climate change is understood to be a global threat, its impacts are not felt equally. Marginalised communities are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change, making intersec-

tional climate research and policy essential. This report focuses on the important issue of climate change and how lesbian, gay bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) people are particularly impacted.

This report will first explore how climate change exacerbates existing structural inequalities and places LGBTI+ people at greater risk from the effects of climate change. Then it will investigate how disaster response research, policies, and responses are structured and informed in a way that reinforces predominant heteronormative and cis-gender ideology, resulting in the exclusion of LGBTI+ people.

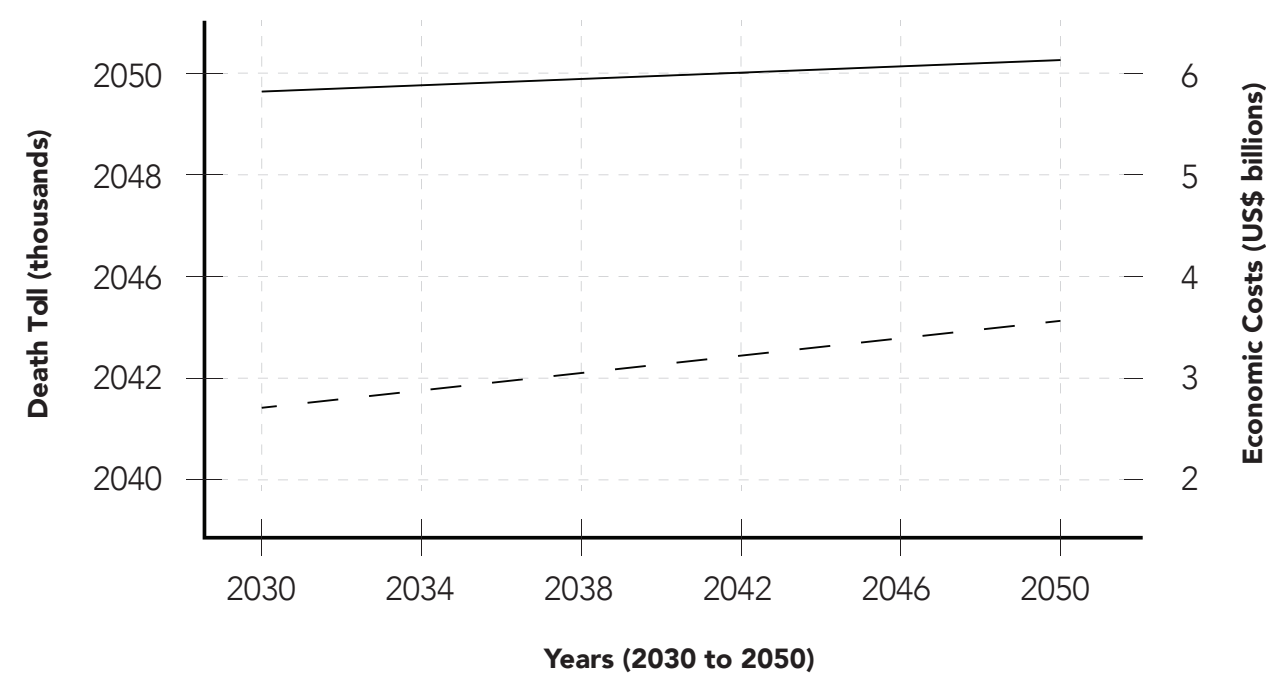
¹ World Health Organisation, Climate Change (2023)

² Ibid.

The report will then explore how LGBTI+ people face barriers to seeking asylum and accessing migration routes, impeding their escape from natural disasters. Final-

ly, the paper will conclude by looking at how, post-disaster, LGBTI+ people often face prolonged harassment and are targeted for redistributive violence.

Projected Impact of Climate Change (2030–2050)



Climate change exacerbates existing structural inequalities and places LGBTQ+ people at greater risk of the effects of climate change.

Structural inequalities may, at first, seem unrelated to climate change; however, the reality is that marginalised communities experience amplified effects. Poverty, housing insecurity, employment/occupation, and identity all impact how an individual is impacted by climate change. This section will explore the specific structural inequalities that result in the LGBTI+ community being particularly at risk from the effects of climate change.

Homelessness and Housing Instability

Comprehensive global data on homelessness is lacking, but research indicates that the LGBTI+ community is disproportionately impacted.³ For instance, a study that reviewed LGBTI+ homelessness in the United States and the United Kingdom found that approximately 28% of LGBTI+ youth report having experienced

3 United Nations Free and Equal, Youth Homelessness (2020)

homelessness or housing instability, 17% of LGBTI+ adults have experienced homelessness in their lives,⁴ and LGBTI+ youth make up 40% of homelessness in the US and 24% in the UK.⁵ Furthermore, LGBTI+ people of colour are more at risk, with nearly 44% of indigenous LGBTI+ youth in the US having experienced homelessness at some point in their life compared to 27% of white LGBTI+ youth.⁶ Similarly, the rate of homelessness is over twice as high for transgender individuals as it is for cisgender and genderqueer sexual minorities.⁷

This data is largely collected from Global North countries as accurate data on both homelessness and LGBTI+ issues is difficult to find in developing countries.⁸ The true reality of housing insecurity for LGBTI+ people in most of Africa, for instance, is unknown, as it is extremely difficult to collect this data due to a legal and social climate that discriminates against the community.⁹ Even in countries – such as South Africa – that do not permit discrimination against LGBTI+ people, data regarding LGBTI+ homelessness is still

difficult to assess due to social attitudes.¹⁰ However, a report from West Africa listed homelessness as one of the serious issues faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth living there.¹¹ A similar report from Nepal suggests that young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in general are at significant risk of home instability.¹² Additionally, broader research from the European Union confirms that a disproportionate percentage of young people without a home identify as lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, or queer. The likelihood of homelessness is especially high for young transgender people. Data from Europe suggests that intersex people are also at a particularly disproportionate risk of homelessness.¹³

Despite lacking global data, the data we do have indicates that LGBTI+ people make up a substantial portion of the homelessness population. This is significant to the discussion of climate change, as homeless people are particularly vulnerable to erratic and more intense weather patterns – such as heat waves, freezing temperatures, and hurri-

canes – due to lack of shelter and access to resources.¹⁴ Transgender homeless people are at particular risk as they are more likely to be unsheltered due to discrimination in shelter spaces. When disaster strikes, these already vulnerable populations become at risk for hypothermia, hyperthermia, respiratory distress from wildfire smoke, and infectious diseases from floods, among other conditions.¹⁵ One study looking at the global impact that climate change has on homeless people showed that mortality of heat waves would double by 2050 and that the mortality of air pollution would increase by 20-30% by 2050.¹⁶ This, in turn, is likely to affect LGBTI+ individuals disproportionately.

Additionally, due to discriminatory housing policies, the exclusion of LGBTI+ people in certain communities, and higher poverty rates, LGBTI+ individuals do not have to be homeless to experience the increased risks associated with climate change. Studies have found that areas with higher proportions of same-sex couples saw increased amounts of hazardous air pollutants (HAPs) compared to

areas with lower proportions of same-sex couples.¹⁷ As a result, while evidence on disproportionate exposure from air pollution is limited, a study from the United States suggests disparities with same-sex enclaves being associated with a 9.8% to 13.3% higher risk of respiratory illnesses and cancer.¹⁸ These respiratory illnesses include asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease caused by lung inflammation resulting from air pollution.¹⁹ Consequently, even when accounting for other confounders such as race, sexual orientation is a strong indicator of living in an area with high levels of HAPs.²⁰

The discrimination experienced by sexual and gender minorities also often leads them to seek out and live in larger segregated and disadvantaged communities where any potential natural disaster will have catastrophic local effects. For example, in Kingston, Jamaica, due to social exclusion many LGBTI+ youth live in camps outside the city that are easily flooded and destroyed during the recurrent hurricanes and floods. These communities are isolated and face extensive geographical barriers to accessing aid.

4 Wilson et. al, Homelessness among LGBT Adults in the US (UCLA School of Law, 2020)

5 Fraser et. al, LGBTIQ+ Homelessness: A Review of the Literature (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2019)

6 Equal Asia Foundation, Understanding the Sheltering and Housing Needs of LGBTIQ+ Persons in Asia (2023)

7 Wilson et. al, Homelessness among LGBT Adults in the US (UCLA School of Law, 2020)

8 Jha, Abhishek, A Hard Look at the Problem of Homeless LGBT Youth in India and Abroad (Youth Ki Awaaz, 2015)

9 Livermore, Xavier, Safe Homes for African LGBTQ+ Youth (CORE UK, 2021)

10 Ibid.

11 United Nations Free and Equal, Youth Homelessness (2020)

12 Ibid.

13 United Nations Free and Equal, Youth Homelessness (2020)

14 Fraser et. al, LGBTIQ+ Homelessness: A Review of the Literature (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2019)

15 Fraser et. al, LGBTIQ+ Homelessness: A Review of the Literature (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2019)

16 Brodie Ramin and Tomislav Svoboda, Health of the Homeless and Climate Change (Journal of Urban Health, 2009)

17 Fraser et. al, LGBTIQ+ Homelessness: A Review of the Literature (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2019)

18 Goldsmith and Bell, Queering Environmental Justice: Unequal Environmental Health Burden on the LGBTQ+ Community (American Journal of Public Health, 2022)

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

If they are able to overcome geographic barriers caused by social exclusion, they will then be met with homophobia from the aid providers themselves.²¹

Poverty and Unemployment

While, as indicated above, poverty is another existing structural inequality that places LGBTI+ communities at greater risk for the impacts of climate change, the link between poverty and LGBTI+ identities is harder to draw due to the nuanced nature of the relationship. Different demographics within the wider LGBTI+ community have varying likelihoods of experiencing poverty; for example, a literature review of LGBTI+ homelessness found that white lesbian women are likely to be high earners, while white gay men and gay and lesbian people of colour are more likely to be lower earners.²² Furthermore, the LGBTI+ population is more susceptible to unemployment than the non-LGBTI+ population, with one study showing that 9% of LGBTI+ individuals in the US are unemployed compared with 5% of cisgender, heterosexuals.²³ After the COVID-19 pandemic, this figure rose to 22% by 2022.²⁴ Moreover, the unemployment rate amongst transgender people in the US is triple that of the general population and

is even higher for transgender people of colour, resulting in nearly one-third of transgender individuals living in poverty compared with 14% of the general population.²⁵ Due to these findings being sourced from a literature review, they are limited to existing research and do not capture a complete picture of the issue. However, they give us some insight into how LGBTI+ people are disproportionately impacted by unemployment. Lack of work or income can place individuals in poverty, which is associated with exposure to environmental pollution and injustice.

Employment Discrimination

LGBTI+ poverty rates are in part due to employment discrimination, which also results in LGBTI+ individuals being more likely to work in certain occupations. For example, across the Asia-Pacific, reports of discrimination in employment are exceedingly common. In Thailand, as a result, those least able to hide their LGBTI+ identities report being limited to the hospitality, entertainment, and sex work industries.²⁶ Limited access to substantial employment results in financial instability. In India, preliminary research suggests that 66% of gay men in Chennai report in-

comes of less than \$1.50 per day, in contrast to the national average of \$3.94.²⁷

As a result of employment discrimination, the types of jobs that LGBTI+ individuals typically occupy are vulnerable to economic downturns and hardship caused by climate change.²⁸ Industries directly impacted by climate change include farming, fishing, forestry, and those professions that rely on natural processes. These are air and water purification, soil renewal and fertilisation, pollination, pest control, the moderation of extreme temperatures, and the protection provided by natural infrastructure (e.g. forests) against storms, floods, and strong winds. Environmental degradation threatens these ecosystem services and the jobs that depend on them.²⁹ Globally, 1.2 billion jobs currently rely on the effective management and sustainability of the environment;³⁰ in Africa, these sectors represent 58% of total employment.³¹ The share of employment that relies on ecosystem services varies widely across the G20 countries, with India, China, and Indonesia having the highest proportions, at 52%, 50%, and 41%, respectively.³² In the United Kingdom and Germany, respectively, 5% and 6% of total employment relies directly on ecosystem services, while in the European

Union (EU) as a whole the proportion is as high as 16%.³³ When people in all fields of work experience economic instability or hardship, they have less excess funds to spend on discretionary expenses like going out to restaurants, paying for entertainment, or sex work. Therefore, the fact that 34% of jobs in the G20 countries currently rely directly on ecosystem services and, hence, on effective and sustainable management of the environment ties LGBTI+ poverty and employment directly to climate change, because it means that LGBTI+ workers will experience secondary economic hardship.³⁴

Conclusion

This section has outlined two main points. Firstly, despite lacking global data, LGBTI+ people seem to be disproportionately impacted by homelessness, which is significant to the discussion of climate change since homeless people are particularly vulnerable to erratic weather patterns causing respiratory illnesses, infectious diseases, and overall increased mortality. Secondly, LGBTI+ people are more likely to experience unemployment and those who are employed face employment discrimination that results in

21 Felisi, Emma, Gender and Sexual Minorities: The Invisible Victims of Climate Change (Report Out, 2021)

22 Fraser et. al, LGBTIQ+ Homelessness: A Review of the Literature (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2019)

23 Ibid.

24 Human Rights Campaign, Understanding Poverty in the LGBTQ+ Community, 2023, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-poverty-in-the-lgbtq-community>

25 Ibid.

26 UNDP, USAID, Being LGBT in Asia: Thailand Country Report (2014)

27 Badgett, Lee, The Economic Cost of Stigma and the Exclusion of LGBT People (World Bank, 2014)

28 ILO, The Employment Impact of Climate Change Adaptation (2018)

29 Ibid.

30 GCA, State and Trends Report (2021)

31 Ibid.

32 ILO, The Employment Impact of Climate Change Adaptation (2018)

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

LGBTI+ individuals being more likely to work in certain industries, such as hospitality, entertainment, and sex work, which are vulnerable to economic hardship caused by climate change. Both employment discrimination and unemployment can place individuals at risk of or in poverty, which is associated with exposure to environmental pollution and injustice.

Therefore, the LGBTI+ community represents a disproportionate fraction of the homeless and impoverished population, which are at an increased risk of succumbing to the negative impacts of climate change due to structural inequalities such as employment and housing discrimination.



Disaster response research, policies, and response are structured and informed in a way that reinforced heteronormative and cis gender ideology.

Due to a lack of research regarding how the LGBTI+ community is impacted by climate change as well as limited representation in the policy creation process, disaster response research, policies, and responses are often structured and informed in a way that inadvertently exclude LGBTI+ communities.³⁵ Within the

academic field of development studies, research focusing on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) has increased in the past two decades, but that knowledge has yet to filter into the mainstream development and climate sectors.³⁶ As a result, an intersectional approach to disaster

³⁵ Landesman, Tucker, What Does Queer Have to Do with It? (IIED, 2022)

³⁶ Ibid.

planning has not yet been fully developed nor have LGBTI+ voices been integrated, leading to a limited understanding of gender diverse needs, concepts such as chosen family, and infrastructure needed to overcome LGBTI+ specific barriers.³⁷ Consequently, people with diverse SOGI-ESC are excluded from international development programming and climate action. This exclusion perpetuates historical injustices.³⁸ Additionally, where research does exist, its utility is limited by the criminalisation of sexual and gender identities that prevents the implementation of inclu-

sive policies in many parts of the world.³⁹ We see this barrier identified by UNAIDS in a press release that expressed concern over the 2023 “Anti-Homosexuality Bill” in Uganda. UNAIDS said that: “The criminali[s]ation of people based on their sexual orientation is a denial of human rights and a threat to public health in the context of the HIV response... Respect for the rights of all people, including those most vulnerable to HIV, led to the effective roll-out of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services. The Anti-Homosexuality Bill risks undermining this progress.”⁴⁰

FIJI CASE STUDY

Fiji’s Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Agreement (CAA) policies, legislations and frameworks make very little or no reference to people of diverse SOGIEISC. As a result, within the development sector there is limited, readily-available evidence on the links between SOGIEISC and climate change as well as the specific need of LGBTI+ people. For instance, the use of ‘gender’ in Fiji climate policies and legislations is specifically in respect or reference to women and is conflated with ‘sex,’ even though sex and gender have different meanings. Except for the National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2018-2030, no other policy or legislation specifically mentioned the LGBTI+ community.⁴¹ As a result, Fijian LGBTI+ communities and civil society organisations have had to fill this gap themselves. The Rainbow Pride Foundation (RPF) is an organisation that advocates for the rights of LGBTI+ people with hubs spread across various areas and islands in Fiji. Some hub members used their accumulated savings to provide for other community members, prepared meals, and opened their homes

to other members to ensure they had daily meals and shelter. Different hubs within RPF also created mental health support systems for their members, which consisted of daily virtual check-ins, and sharing of food and other resources. In August, after careful assessment of the various community hubs, RPF distributed food relief packages to community members in need around Fiji, with the support of multiple local and international donors. While the resilience and capability of RPF and the LGBTI+ community is something to be admired, they should not have to face crises alone.⁴²

PHILIPPINES CASE STUDY

Due to the conceptions of gender, sex, sexuality, and family, a Filipina trans woman reported needing to use her name at birth instead of her preferred name to access typhoon-related relief efforts and social services. Not only does this disregard the transwoman’s gender identity and chosen name, but it also outs her and places her in danger for transphobic treatment. It has been documented that transgender individuals were often denied food and housing support.⁴³

As a result of the lack of focus on LGBTI+ issues during disaster response planning, LGBTI+ people reportedly face numerous barriers in accessing emergency shelters when climate disasters occur. Firstly, in government and organisational policies, ‘family’ often means an opposite-sex couple with children, and ‘sex’ refers to binary (male/female) concepts of gender in emergency relief practices. For instance, during Hurricane Katrina, ‘families,’ were defined by governmental and non-governmental agencies in New Orleans as comprising an opposite-sex couple and their biological children.⁴⁴ Those in same-sex relationships were therefore not recognised as comprising a ‘family’ or a ‘couple’ and were excluded from the support provided to heterosexual residents. As a result, some

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 UNAIDS, Press Release (2011)

41 Felisi, Emma, Gender and Sexual Minorities: The Invisible Victims of Climate Change (Report Out, 2021)

42 Marisa Hutchinson, “Facing Intersecting Crises: LGBTIQ+ Resilience in Fiji,” Open Global Rights, 2020

43 Alibudbud, Rowalt, “Gender in Climate Change: Safeguarding LGBTQ+ Mental Health in the Philippine Climate Change Response From a Minority Stress Perspective”, PubMed, 2023, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10111101/#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20a%20trans%20woman,or%20a%20priority%20%5B4%5D>

44 Dominey-Howes et. al, Queering Disasters: On the Need to Account for LGBTI Experiences in Natural Disaster Contexts (Place and Culture, 2013)

same-sex couples were separated and resettled in different cities. Additionally,⁴⁵ emergency shelters are challenging spaces for LGBTI+ people, especially same-sex couples, ‘effeminate’ males, trans individuals, and other gender minorities.⁴⁶ In some instances, sexual and gender minorities have been denied access to emergency shelters and aid – such as food or finance – as they could not be accommodated in relief policies that framed recipients as ‘nuclear families,’ or as ‘male’ and ‘female’ individuals.⁴⁷ When LGBTI+ people are able to gain entry to emergency shelters, the safety of these spaces can be compromised by fear of abuse. LGBTI+ people experienced abuse in shelters following the 2010 Haitian earthquake with lesbians, bisexual women, and trans and intersex people suffering gender-based violence and “corrective rape”⁴⁸ Gay and bisexual men were also targeted for their reported forced “sexual relations with straight-identified men for food or money.”⁴⁹ As a result of this abuse and discrimination, LGBTI+ people often avoid official shelters and seek safe housing elsewhere.⁵⁰ However, as highlighted in the issues of LGBTI+ homelessness and housing discrimination, local discrimination also often leaves sexual and gender minorities in inhospitable or unsafe housing environments which are particularly vulnerable to erratic weather patterns. For example, during an interview with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), a transwoman from India stated: “With the upcoming monsoons, there will be heavy rains in Chennai and my house will also be flooded, because of which I can’t even invite any of my friends from the community to my home. It’s very difficult for a transgender person to get a house in the city, to make the house-owners understand. Hence, whatever the issue, I’ll stick with my current house because there’s some understanding with its owner.”⁵¹

45 Murray et. al, Queer Domicide (Home Cultures, 2014)

46 Ibid.

47 Murray et. al, Queer Domicide (Home Cultures, 2014)

48 Felisi, Emma, Gender and Sexual Minorities: The Invisible Victims of Climate Change (Report Out, 2021)

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

INDIA CASE STUDY

The Aravanis – a group who may be born intersex or male, dress in feminine clothes and generally see themselves as neither women nor men – were exposed to physical harm in shelters during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.⁵² Aravanis who accessed shelters reported harassment and physical and sexual abuse with one reporting that they “refrained from using a shower at an emergency shelter for privacy reasons” and another was called a “cross-dressing deviant fag” by a volunteer.

HURRICANE KATRINA CASE STUDY

During Hurricane Katrina in the US, it was documented that trans people faced discrimination and transphobia in emergency shelters, as they were compelled to house with the sex they were assigned at birth, rather than what they identified as, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination and violence.⁵³ The bathroom and shower facilities were a particularly dangerous place in emergency shelters for trans people. In one instance, a transgender woman was jailed for showering in a women’s bathroom, even after a shelter volunteer allowed it.⁵⁴ Other transgender individuals were denied aid from faith-based organisations for not possessing identification that matched their name or gender.

Climate Change and HIV

In addition to being turned away from shelters and being denied emergency resources, LGBTI+ individuals also face barriers to obtaining HIV medication during climate crises. Queer men receiving treatment for HIV/AIDS said that their ability to

access this medicine was made difficult by the homophobia of medical staff on the ground; others reported being denied aid packages as same-gender couples because of the heteronormative articulations of family in disaster response policies.⁵⁵ HIV is one of the most studied health outcomes that disproportionately affect

52 Dominey-Howes et. al, Queering Disasters: On the Need to Account for LGBTI Experiences in Natural Disaster Contexts (Place and Culture, 2013)

53 Felisi, Emma, Gender and Sexual Minorities: The Invisible Victims of Climate Change (Report Out, 2021)

54 Ibid.

55 Goldsmith and Bell, Queering Environmental Justice: Unequal Environmental Health Burden on the LGBTQ+ Community (American Journal of Public Health, 2022)

LGBTI+ persons, and environmental conditions have been shown to exacerbate it. For instance, air pollution can cause and worsen conditions such as pneumocystis pneumonia and tuberculosis (TB), leading to complications in HIV-positive individuals. As such, these individuals are at greater risk from a variety of complicating factors, in particular if they cannot access their medications and treatment.

In 1993, the Lancet published a series of research linking climate change to changes in infectious diseases, including HIV.⁵⁶ Climate change is predicted to alter the prevalence and distribution of numerous infectious diseases, including vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, and Lyme disease, as well as various water-borne diseases and fungi.⁵⁷ Additionally, decreased air quality, for example, can increase respiratory and cardiovascular disease. Inhalation of air pollutants affects the lung function and increases vulnerability to lung infections such as TB and other forms of pneumo-

nia.⁵⁸ Those who are immunocompromised, including those with an untreated HIV infection, are more prone to developing serious infections from many of these diseases.⁵⁹ HIV-infected individuals who have concurrent co-infections with malaria and other insect-borne or water-borne infections are also known to have worse HIV health outcomes.⁶⁰ For people living with HIV, disruptions to antiretrovirals (ART) can weaken the immune system, making them much more susceptible to other infections and diseases caused by extreme weather conditions such as cholera, malaria, and gastroenteritis.⁶¹ This is particularly concerning considering the barriers that many face to access HIV treatment during climate crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, for example, WHO and UNAIDS estimated that a possible six-month long disruption of antiretroviral therapy in sub-Saharan Africa would have led to more than 500,000 extra deaths from AIDS-related illnesses, including from tuberculosis.⁶²

56 Mark Lieber et al., The Synergistic Relationship between Climate Change and the HIV/AIDS Epidemic: A Conceptual Framework, (AIDS and Behavior, 2021)

57 Ibid.

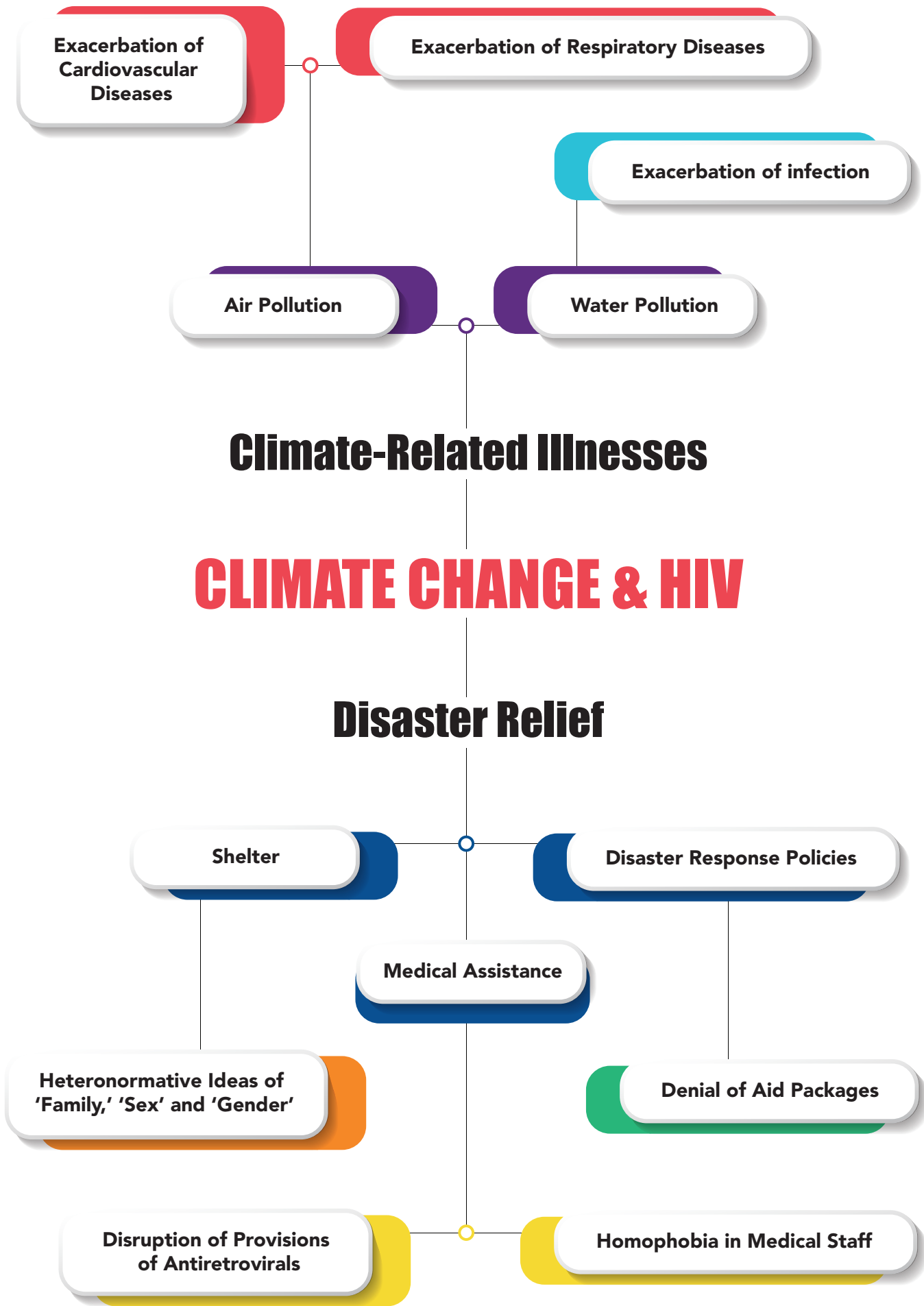
58 ILO, Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Sustainable Economies and Societies for All (2015)

59 Mark Lieber et al., The Synergistic Relationship between Climate Change and the HIV/AIDS Epidemic: A Conceptual Framework, (AIDS and Behavior, 2021)

60 Ibid.

61 ILO, Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Sustainable Economies and Societies for All (2015)

62 Ibid.



Conclusion

This section has explored how LGBTI+ people have been historically excluded from the policy making process which has resulted in LGBTI+ voices not being integrated into an intersectional approach to disaster planning. There is a limited understanding of gender diverse needs, concepts such as chosen family, and infrastructure needed to overcome LGBTI+

specific barriers. Consequently, LGBTI+ people struggle to access aid and safe emergency shelter if they do not fit the binary definitions of 'sex' or have a heterosexual, nuclear family. Here, we can see how disaster response research, policies, and responses are structured and informed in a way that reinforces heteronormative and cis-gender ideology, resulting in the exclusion of LGBTI+ people.



Face barriers to seeking asylum/migration route impeding escape from natural disasters.

LGBTI+ individuals are more likely to have trouble crossing borders to escape conflict and disaster. Barriers are found at every turn of the road, starting with exiting their home country. Firstly, due to the fact that consensual sexual acts between same-sex adults are criminalised in 72 United Nations member states and only 50 countries recognise trans people's rights to have their gender identity legally recognised, LGBTI+ individuals experience a lack of police protection or assis-

tance resulting in arrest, detention, and extortion.^{63 64} Additionally, LGBTI+ people can apply for refugee status via the family reunification route if they are sponsored by a family member who has secured refugee status in another country. However, this is made difficult for LGBTI+ applicants, who are significantly more likely than cisgender and heterosexual people to be estranged from their birth families or not have their marriages recognised.⁶⁵ Due to estrangement from immediate

⁶³ Chaka Bachmann, No Safe Refuge (Stonewall, 2016)

⁶⁴ University of Virginia, CHALLENGES FOR LGBTQ ASYLUM SEEKERS, (2021)

⁶⁵ Ari Shaw and Namrata Verges, LGBTQI+ REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS A Review of Research and Data Needs, (UCLA School of Law, 2022)

family, LGBTI+ asylum seekers may have limited support or financial assistance. This is amplified by some cultures relying on male family members for funding and travel accompaniment.⁶⁶ Furthermore, transgender people may not have travel documents aligning with their gender identity; this can cause heightened scrutiny at borders, and people living with HIV may be barred from travel.

If LGBTI+ asylum seekers are able to overcome the barriers to exiting their home country, the next obstacles they face will be in transit. LGBTI+ people have reported experiencing violence and harassment on journeys to refugee camps after disaster, describing experiencing harassment and discrimination from other detainees due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many feel forced to hide their identity while in detention to avoid being discriminated against. As a consequence, LGBTI+ asylum seekers in detention also suffer particular isolation. If unable to hide their identity, LGBTI+ refugees are bullied, harassed and even physically attacked by other detainees.

“My cellmate was rude to me when I told him I was gay. He never talked to me again.”

Bilal, Pakistani asylum seeker

“I didn’t feel safe. People called me names and said not nice things to me. I just felt

like this is the place where they may not harm you directly but will point fingers and say things. That’s why I just kept to myself.”

Kamali, Ugandan asylum seeker

“For trans detainees, this environment can be particularly challenging and dangerous. One participant told of being placed in a male detention centre despite making it clear that she identified as a woman and had been taking steps to transition. Participants described how detention centres failed to take basic steps that could help trans people to feel safer, like providing private spaces to shower and get changed.”⁶⁷

Gasha, Cameroonian asylum seeker

Abuse is also endured from staff who may demonstrate discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTI+ people. They may fail to protect LGBTI+ asylum seekers from the abuse and harassment of other detainees and, in some cases, perpetuate the abuse themselves. Some interviewees reported accounts of inappropriate remarks, intimidation, and even having their food thrown away as a form of punishment by detention officers.

While it is understandable and justifiable for LGBTI+ people to seek asylum elsewhere, they face extensive barriers to seeking asylum and accessing migration routes, impeding their escape from natural disasters.

The struggle does not end after a climate disaster for LGBTI+ people when they risk becoming victims of redistributive religious violence. Some religious groups believe that disasters are divine retribution for “sinners” and their supporters, claiming disasters to be acts of God against sexual “transgression.”⁶⁸ As a result, both stigma and violence against LGBTI+ people increase.⁶⁹ After earthquakes and hurricanes in New Zealand, Malaysia, the US, Israel, and Haiti, religious leaders told followers that these disasters were punishments from God for the prevalence of queer and trans people in society.⁷⁰ This led to increased rates of retributive sexual and physical violence towards LGBTI+ people. After the earthquake in Haiti, lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual people reported being physically attacked, sexually assaulted, and even killed

by those seeking retribution, with no protection offered by state officials who instead responded by increasing the rate of arrests and persecution towards LGBTI+ individuals.⁷¹ This “divine punishment” of the LGBTI+ community also extends to continued deprivation of resources. During the rehabilitation months after a typhoon, LGBTI+ Filipinos continued to report instances of deprivation of livelihood support and resources. For example, a gay man was deprived of a fish cage because of his sexual orientation, and long-term discrimination was highlighted by a trans woman who mentioned that there were no opportunities or even recognition of LGBTI+ people during their 11-month stay in a temporary shelter.⁷² Hence, discriminatory behaviours towards LGBTI+ individuals may last for months following climate-related events.

66 University of Virginia, CHALLENGES FOR LGBTQ ASYLUM SEEKERS, (2021)

67 Chaka Bachmann, No Safe Refuge (Stonewall, 2016)

68 Murray et. al, Queer Domicide (Home Cultures, 2014)

69 Ibid.

70 Goldsmith et. al, Queer and Present Danger (Disasters, 2022)

71 Ibid.

72 Goldsmith et. al, Queer and Present Danger (Disasters, 2022)

Conclusion

Climate change is not just an environmental crisis; it is a social justice issue that amplifies existing inequalities and disproportionately harms marginalised communities. This research has demonstrated how LGBTI+ individuals, already vulnerable due to systemic discrimination, face heightened risks from climate-related disasters. Homelessness, poverty, and employment discrimination place LGBTI+ people at increased exposure to environmental hazards. When disasters strike, they are excluded from relief efforts, denied access to emergency shelters, and subjected to violence. Attempts to seek asylum or migrate away from climate crises are met with legal and systemic barriers, preventing them from finding safety. Even in the aftermath of disasters, LGBTI+ communities continue to experience prolonged persecution, blamed for the very catastrophes that devastate them.

Barriers to confront this issue continue to arise due to global economic hardship, political shifts in leadership, and conflict resulting in the diversion of resources away from urgent climate action.⁷³ We see this in both the UK and US, two lead-

ing global powers. Firstly, the UK has announced a reduction in its aid budget that finances climate action from 0.5% of GDP to 0.3% by 2027.⁷⁴ While the Labour government has stated it is committed to meeting its pledge of spending £11.6 billion on climate finances between 2021-2026, achieving this goal will be challenging due to the aid cuts and the fact that more than half of the money was originally expected to be spent in the last two years. Overall, there is a current lack of clarity on how UK aid cuts will impact climate finance; however, ODI climate economist Laetitia Pettinotti stated that: "It seems likely that climate finance could be on the chopping board."⁷⁵ Even more concerning, the US is projecting no ambiguity in its reduction of climate finance after the election of Donald Trump resulting in the US withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement and cutting a third of US climate finance with the suspension of USAID.⁷⁶

The situation is looking bleak, but LGBTI+ communities have continually demonstrated resilience in the face of climate change, forming mutual aid networks

and advocating for inclusive policies. However, survival should not depend on self-reliance alone. Climate policy, disaster response frameworks, and migration systems must be restructured to address the unique vulnerabilities faced by LGBTI+ individuals. This requires an intersectional approach – one that recognises the compounding effects of discrimination

and ensures that climate action is inclusive, equitable, and just. Only by acknowledging and addressing these disparities can we create a future where all people, regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, or sex characteristics, have equal access to safety, support, and dignity in the face of climate change.

73 Sharrock, David. "What to Expect in Climate Change in 2025". Global Center on Adaptation. 13 January 2025. <https://gca.org/what-to-expect-in-climate-change-in-2025-opportunities-amid-challenges/>

74 Farand, Chloe. "UK aid budget cuts threaten climate finance pledge to vulnerable nations, experts warn". Climate Home News. 25 February 2025. <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2025/02/25/uk-aid-budget-cuts-threaten-climate-finance-pledge-to-vulnerable-nations-experts-warn/>

75 Ibid.

76 Harvey, Fiona. "Trump's USAid cuts will have huge impact on global climate finance, data shows". The Guardian. 10 March 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/10/trumps-usaid-cuts-will-have-huge-impact-on-global-climate-finance-data-shows>

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