

# Climate Change, Reproductive Justice, and the Future of Midwifery Care

Dr Heather McMullen  
Senior Lecturer  
Queen Mary University of London  
([h.mcmullen@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:h.mcmullen@qmul.ac.uk))



## A Gambian midwife's perspective on extreme heat and pregnancy

Extreme heat will only get worse with climate change, and it has been linked to health risks for pregnant women and their babies. We spoke to a midwife and a researcher in The Gambia to learn about their perspectives on the health impacts of heat on pregnancy.



Impacts related to **disaster and displacement**

Changes to **vector borne disease patterns** (i.e. Malaria, Zika) with impacts and maternal/child health

Increases in **poverty**

Impacts on **mental health**

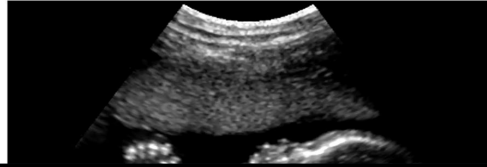
## Climate Change Tied to Pregnancy Risks, Affecting Black Mothers Most

Women exposed to high temperatures or air pollution are more likely to have premature, underweight or stillborn babies, a look at 32 million U.S. births found.

Give this article



127



There is growing evidence on the impacts of climate change on pregnant people /perinatal health.

## Global heating linked to early birth and damage to babies' health, scientists find

Exclusive: Studies show high temperatures and air pollution during pregnancy can cause lifelong health effects



Impacts of increased heat and air pollution:

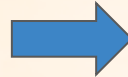
- pre eclampsia
- sleep disruption
- preterm labour
- stillbirth
- low birth weight
- rapid weight gain in babies

Impacts on **maternal nutrition and access to water**

Disruption to **health services**

## CLIMATE CHANGE

- HEAT
- AIR POLLUTION
- EXTREME WEATHER
- VECTOR BORNE DISEASE
- FOOD AND WATER INSECURITY



## IMPACTS ON PERINATAL HEALTH

- Hypertensive disorders (pre-eclampsia, eclampsia),
- Antepartum and postpartum hemorrhage
- Prolonged labour
- Obstetric emergencies and caesarean sections
- Mental health conditions
- Preterm birth
- Low birth weight
- Neonatal sepsis
- Foetal distress (tachycardia, reduced movements)
- Stillbirth
- Neonatal mortality
- Impacts on breastfeeding practices and health seeking behaviours
- Sleep disruptions
- Increased transmission of vector borne diseases with perinatal impacts

# The impacts of climate change on perinatal health

- Climate change is having a negative impact on perinatal health.
- The evidence is growing quickly and impacts on perinatal health are the most evidenced amongst the intersections between climate change and SRHR.
- Climate impacts are exacerbated by existing inequalities leading to poorer health outcomes for groups facing multiple and intersecting forms of oppression.

A systematic review of studies on the association of air pollution and heat exposure with pre-term birth, low birth weight and stillbirth in the USA. The 57 studies they analysed represent over 32 million births and showed a significant association between exposure to air pollutants and heat and birth outcomes across all geographic areas of the country. (Bekkar et al., 2020)

A 2020 meta-analysis by Chersich et al, reviewed birth outcomes in 27 African countries and across 70 studies and found that there is a **5% higher rate of preterm and stillbirth for each 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature and a 16% increase in preterm births during heat waves.** These outcomes were notably **worse for mothers of lower socioeconomic status** (Chersich et al., 2020).

A review of over 90,000 pregnancy loss records across 33 developing countries found that **flood exposure during pregnancy is linked with increased pregnancy loss with an odds ratio of 1.08 percent.** Flooding is expected to increase with greater warming. (He et al., 2024)

# Reproductive Justice and Environmental Reproductive Justice

## REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

- A contemporary framework for activism and for thinking about reproduction
- A political movement that centers social justice and human rights.
- Developed in women of colour in the United States.

The definition of reproductive justice has three primary principles:

- (1) the right not to have a child;
  - (2) the right to have a child; and
  - (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments.
- Demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being.
  - Intersectional approach that recognises multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Ross, L. J., & Solinger, R. (2017). A Reproductive Justice History. In *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (1st ed., pp. 9–57). University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxsth.4> - See work by the Sistersong Collective, Loretta Ross, Jade Sasser and others

## ENVIRONMENTAL REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

- Developed by Mohawk midwife Katsi Cook
- Describes how environmental and reproductive injustices intersect and calls on principles from both movements.
- Enviro injustices can impair biological reproduction, (i.e. toxic exposure, extreme weather events and links with repro concerns such infertility, miscarriage etc.)
- Draws attention to social and cultural reproduction. (i.e ability to continue cultural practices such as traditional food production)

**‘Women are the  
first environment’**

Katsi Cook



(Cook 2007; LaDuke 2015; Hoover 2018) Photo source:  
<https://moonmagazineeditor.medium.com/women-are-the-first-environment-an-interview-with-mohawk-elder-katsi-cook-40ae4151c3cd>

# VIDEO LINK: Climate impacts on midwifery

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNachHVbLWoQ>

# Midwives are critical for climate action

- Midwifery practice can embody many of the principles of reproductive justice and counters some of the logics driving the climate crisis.
- Crucial for providing community-based services, responding to crises and building resilience by providing holistic, person centered care and advocating for those facing health and inequalities and disproportionate environmental exposures.
- Trusted community members with critical community links and networks (ICM, 2024)

**Midwifery practice ‘is inherently intersectional and holistic, addressing the diverse needs of women while promoting long-term health and well-being. Climate resilience is not just about environmental sustainability, but also about ensuring that all individuals have equitable access to care and the ability to make decisions that shape their lives.’**

ICM Report: Interlocked: Midwives and the Climate Crisis. The Hague: International Confederation of Midwives; 2024.

A 2024 survey by ICM found:

- Climate change is impacting community health
- Midwives are crucial first responders
- Climate impacts mental health and presents challenges.
- Midwives need more support and inclusion.
- Midwifery is a form of sustainable health care

Increased need for emergency preparedness.

Impacts on health infrastructure, increasing reliance on community actors.

Increased education and training needs.

Increased stress and risk of burnout.

Decreased access to essential SRHR services.

Wide ranging negative impacts on pregnancy and newborn health outcomes, exacerbated by existing inequalities.

## **CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIDWIFERY PRACTICE CHALLENGES**

Increased reliance on networks, including informal, community ties and relationships.

Increased roles facilitating access and information.

Changes in health seeking behaviours, food and breastfeeding practices.

Impacts on related SRHR challenges, including gender-based violence.

Changes in fertility intentions, and perceptions of pregnancy and parenthood.

Impacts on mental health for pregnant people and families as well as for midwives.



Midwives are **community actors, who understand birthing people and their contexts** and are uniquely positioned to provide support.

Midwives can act as **advocates** for health rights during climate crisis and **support access to lessen inequalities**.

As **trusted providers**, can help support people's health during climate emergencies and with ongoing climate impacts (information, supplies resources etc).

Midwives may be the **first** to understand the lived experiences of climate impacts and have a role to play in developing **research, evidence and practice**.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIDWIFERY PRACTICE: OPPORTUNITIES

Midwifery practice is less carbon intensive than other forms of medical care, making it more **sustainable**.

A trusted relationship with a midwife may **reduce climate anxiety**.

Experience **coordinating care in the community** is essential for climate resilience.

Providing **culturally sensitive** and aware care, **holistic** and person centered **builds trust** in times of uncertainty.

Able to provide **continuity of care and access** when systems are under pressure.

**Leaders** in climate resilience whose **voices are needed** to inform policy.

# EVACUATION CLIP

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p59fUi1aLTM>

# Taking Action: General recommendations

## VOICE AND VISIBILITY

*'Those closest to the problems are closest to the solutions'*

Better / mandatory representation and inclusion in related policy and action

Accounting for the full range of SRHR and going beyond gender

Learning from frameworks built from lived experiences

## DATA AND RESEARCH

Local research using participatory methods

Differentiated and disaggregated data

More research on SRHR and climate intersections

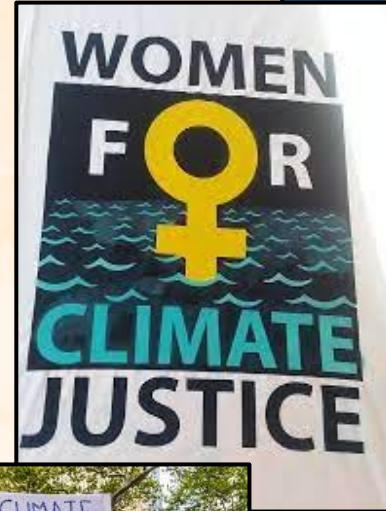
## ACCOUNTABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Holding the right actors accountable

Challenging false solutions

Financial commitments / loss and damage

Strengthening investment and accountability for adaptation



# Taking Action: What can health professionals do?

**ASK:** Learn how climate and environmental impacts are impacting the people you work with.

**DOCUMENT:** Document patterns, cases and trends.

**ADVOCATE:** Use your voice and power to speak up for linkages between health, climate and SRHR.

**EDUCATE:** Educate patients about climate and health.

**COLLABORATE:** Work with patients, partners, allied services and others to better support patients to cope with climate impacts.

**MOBILIZE YOUR POWER:** Use your privilege, position, and access and lived experience to evidence and support more responsive and just policy and healthcare provision.

## Practical Examples:

- Environmental assessments for vulnerable patients.
- Health reminders during heat waves.
- Advocate for cooling systems and provide maps of accessible cooling stations.
- Letters to support occupational health.
- Support enforcement of standards.
- Collect data and inform governing bodies of trends. Including differentiated and disaggregated data.
- Educate about health and climate/ enviro linkages and links between social and ecological determinants.

Human Rights Watch, Black Women's Health Imperative, A Better Balance Legal Centre, Latin Institute for Reproductive Justice Florida, National Birth Equity Collective. (2020) FACT SHEET: Increasing temperatures because of the climate crisis is a reproductive justice issue in the United States.

# Taking Action: What can health professionals do?

**CONNECT:** Make the connections between the environmental determinants of health and other issues such as environmental racism etc.

**AMPLIFY:** Amplify the voices and lived experiences of those facing acute intersections between climate, health and SRHR.

The Canadian Association of Midwives:

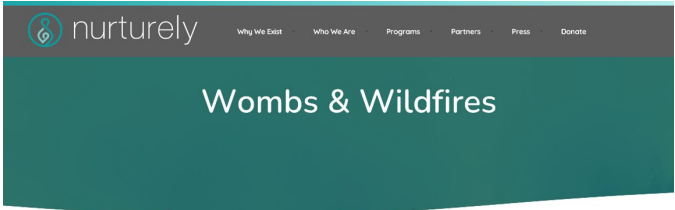
‘Midwives work at the intersection of climate and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and are **uniquely positioned to support bodily autonomy and the rights of all individuals to raise families in safe, sustainable environments**. As **essential frontline** healthcare providers, midwives provide community-based SRH care, vital to **strengthening resilience and improving the health of communities**.’ (ICM Position Statement, 2024)

The International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) also

‘...recommends that reproductive and other health professionals **advocate for policies to prevent exposure to toxic environmental chemicals, work to ensure a healthy food system for all, make environmental health part of health care, and champion environmental justice**’ (Di Renzo et al 2019).

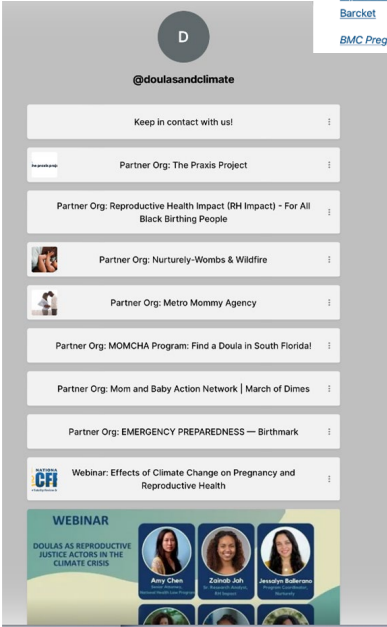
# Taking Action

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= DUECUg8gnY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUECUg8gnY)



Perinatal people are a small portion of society at any one moment, but the perinatal time period really affects EVERY portion of society. Perinatal is a unique opportunity for intervention, prevention, and long-term impact that is not only more vulnerable than the other "vulnerable" populations, but also has more opportunity for impact.

Join Nurturely, Human Rights Watch, and cross-sector stakeholders as we work to understand the harm of wildfire on pregnant and postpartum people and babies and co-create solutions to minimize risk and health impacts



Links & References:

Planetary Health Collaborative for Nurses and Midwives  
<https://planetaryhealthcare.com.au/>

Wombs and Wildfires  
<https://nurturely.org/wildfires>

@doulasandclimate

Interlocked Report by ICM  
<https://internationalmidwives.org/resources/interlocked-midwives-and-climate/>

Equity Assessment Tools  
<https://bmcpregnancychildbirth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12884-024-06761-z>

UNFPA Asia Pacific : Midwives a vital climate solution

Human Rights Watch: Articles by Skye Wheeler



# Thank You!



Photo: Members of the SRHR and Climate Justice Coalition at COP 27 in Dubai