POLICY BRIEF

Climate Change, Gender and Youth in Gatumba

Vulnerability, Resilience and the Limits of Informal Adaptation — Gatumba, Burundi

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This research is funded by the Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) of Belgium.

89,000
people internally displaced in Burundi — mostly women and children (July 2025)

17.7%
of landholders in Burundi are women, though ~80% of Burundians own land

17 of ~80
WPS National Action Plans reference the climate–gender–conflict nexus

THE ISSUE AT A GLANCE

Gatumba, a peri-urban border zone in western Burundi facing the Democratic Republic of the Congo, has suffered recurrent and increasingly destructive flooding for the past decade. These shocks have disrupted livelihoods, housing, schooling and social cohesion. While the whole community is affected, the impacts are deeply gendered and generational. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in 2025 and 2026, this brief shows how climate change, gender and youth marginalisation intersect to produce differentiated insecurity, and how women and young people sustain fragile, under-recognised forms of resilience.

The central message is simple: climate responses in Gatumba should move from **short-term coping to structural resilience**. Emergency relief remains necessary, but it should be linked to locally-led adaptation, conflict-sensitive peacebuilding, gender-transformative programming and meaningful youth inclusion.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Invest in locally-led, gender-responsive adaptation.** Give multi-year core funding, instead of short project cycles, to women's tontines, youth groups and producer associations, with participatory risk analysis before dikes, relocation or livelihood projects.
- **Secure women's land and financial rights as resilience infrastructure.** Fund legal literacy, joint land registration and inclusive finance; name women as rights holders in compensation and relocation schemes.
- **Treat youth education, livelihoods and participation as climate and peace priorities.** Provide fee waivers and catch-up classes, climate-relevant Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and start-up grants, and formal youth advisory roles, not token consultation.
- **Embed 'do no harm' and conflict-sensitivity reviews into all infrastructure**, **relocation and adaptation programmes**. Strengthen **existing local and intergenerational mediation** mechanisms and inclusive decision-making spaces to ensure adaptation investments are informed by local dynamics.
- **Fund mental health, psychosocial support and protection.** Integrate MHPSS and survivor-centred SGBV referral pathways into flood response, and tackle the economic drivers of survival sex.
- **Shift to flexible, multi-year resilience financing.** Build crisis modifiers and loss-and-damage support for households that repeatedly lose assets, and make EU climate funding reachable by local groups.
- **Fund research, monitoring and local evidence production.** Commission participatory action research with Burundian partners and require sex-, age- and displacement-disaggregated data.

A core test for donors

Every intervention should answer four questions clearly: Who decides? Who controls resources? Who carries the unpaid burden? Who is protected when shocks recur?

A COMPOUND, CHRONIC CRISIS

Flooding in Gatumba does not strike a stable community. It lands on an already fragile context shaped by what scholars call *slow violence* — the gradual, cumulative harm of environmental degradation, poverty and insecurity (Nixon, 2011). The cyclical pattern of flood, displacement and return prevents lasting recovery, while regional instability in eastern DRC drives cross-border movement and the prolonged closure of the border has cut off the cross-border trade that many households depended on. By July 2025 around 89,000 people remained internally displaced in Burundi, the majority women and children, and large-scale refugee returns anticipated in 2026 will add further pressure on land, services and local resources. Climate vulnerability here cannot be understood apart from these wider social, political and economic dynamics.

WHY GENDER AND YOUTH: THE TRIPLE NEXUS

Climate change rarely causes conflict directly. It interacts with existing structural vulnerabilities and political economies, shaping *pathways of climate insecurity* which lead to livelihood deterioration, migration and governance stress. Gender, age, and class determine who is exposed and who can adapt to floods in Burundi.

Three findings recur in the literature. First, women who become de facto household heads under climate stress manage food, resources and care while remaining excluded from formal rights over land and credit. Second, deteriorating livelihoods erode culturally prescribed pathways to recognised manhood, a dynamic that can feed grievance and mobilisation. Third, role change under compound stress is fluid but unequal: women's expanded

roles usually mean heavier workloads rather than greater authority.

Despite existing scientific findings, policy frameworks remain siloed. For example, the Women, Peace and Security agenda (UNSCR 1325; 2242) and the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan each incorporate gender but rarely the compound climate–conflict dynamic, and 'gender' is still conflated with 'women'. The EU's 2023 Joint Communication on the Climate and Security Nexus mentions gender only three times, without specifying what gender-responsiveness requires.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Eroded land-based livelihoods deepen structural vulnerability

Recurrent flooding has destroyed farmland, homes and assets, forcing repeated cycles of displacement and return. Women are the main cultivators of land but land is typically registered in husbands' names; flood-induced abandonment thus stripped many women of both income and legal access to productive resources, leaving them ineligible for credit, compensation or relocation benefits. When floods destroy crops and land, women moved into precarious informal trade, laundry and day labour, while resource scarcity and male control over land also intensified transactional and survival sex as a coping strategy.

KEY FINDING Climate shocks magnify pre-existing gender inequalities in asset ownership and economic autonomy.

> *"I have nine children. After the floods, our house was destroyed and we had to live in a tent. That is when my husband left me. The land I used to cultivate was registered in his name; now that he is gone, I no longer have access to it. To survive, I wash other people's clothes to feed my children."*
>
> **— Woman living in a tent near the zone office, June 2025**

2. Reconfigured gender roles, unchanged power

Small-scale food production — socially coded as women's work — has become the primary household livelihood, yet men often remain only marginally involved, so responsibility for survival falls increasingly on women. Women carry a **double burden** of income generation and almost all care work. Men, meanwhile, experience the collapse of provider roles as acute psychological strain, often pushed into precarious survival activities such as collecting firewood and scrap to sell, or migrating temporarily, sometimes establishing new families elsewhere and leaving women fully responsible for household survival. In this conflict-affected setting, environmental stress rarely makes gender relations more equal: it tends to add workload and mental burden without redistributing rights, resources or decision-making power.

> *"My house was destroyed because of the floods. I am a farmer, but all my farming land was also destroyed. I tried to start another activity, maybe selling small things, but it is not very profitable because I do not have enough capital."*
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> **— Man, 69, June 2025, Gaharawe**

3. Youth marginalisation and disrupted trajectories

Flooding drives school dropout, precarious labour and exclusion from land and governance. Trajectories are sharply gendered: boys move into fishing, construction and motorcycle-taxi work tied to contested masculinity, while girls are pushed into low-margin petty trade, domestic roles and heightened exposure to transactional sex. Young people describe institutions as *"present but largely ineffective"*, fuelling frustration and a sense of exclusion. Youth exclusion from climate governance is even more pronounced than women's.

4. Informal adaptation: real agency, structural limits

In the absence of sustained institutional support, adaptation is organised through informal infrastructures: women's savings groups (tontines), family networks, youth peer systems and fishermen's associations. These absorb shocks and sustain social cohesion, but their prominence reflects the withdrawal of formal support rather than structural resilience. Adaptation is thus privatised and redistributed downward onto those with the least assets and power; the poorest are often excluded because they cannot make regular contributions. As shocks recur, the resource base erodes and these mechanisms risk becoming overstretched.

> *"To start my avocado-selling business, I took out a loan from my tontine. Without this solidarity among women, I would not have been able to restart after losing everything to the floods. The tontine gives me hope."*
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> **— Woman, 32, February 2026**

Yet not everyone can participate: the requirement to make regular contributions excludes the most vulnerable, such as recently displaced women and those without stable income, precisely when they need support most. Because these mechanisms sit outside formal recognition and policy frameworks, they cannot scale or address the structural drivers of vulnerability.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR POLICY

The Gatumba case shows that climate change operates less as a standalone crisis than as a force that amplifies underlying inequality. Informal coping (women's tontines, youth solidarity, family networks) sustains everyday resilience but is not designed to withstand repeated shocks of increasing intensity. **Without structural change in land access, financial inclusion, education continuity and participation, these strategies will remain fragile and reactive, and the gaps are likely to deepen into longer-term instability.**

A durable response depends on connecting local initiatives to institutional frameworks and treating women and young people as active participants in adaptation and governance rather than as beneficiaries of aid. The recommendations above are designed to be operationalised together, and to align mutually reinforcing instruments including the WPS and Youth, Peace and Security agendas, the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan, the EU Climate and Security Nexus (2023) and EU Great Lakes Strategy (2023), and Belgium's international climate action priorities, so that climate finance reaches those most affected and does not reinforce the very inequalities it should help dismantle.

Taken together, the findings confirm that climate insecurity in Gatumba cannot be addressed without tackling the entrenched inequalities it amplifies — gendered land tenure, financial exclusion, educational disruption and the exclusion of women and youth from decision-making.