

# Climate Change and Human Exploitation in Antigua and Barbuda

“When many people, because of natural disasters, cannot sustain themselves financially in the tourist industry – which in general does not pay a lot of money – that creates a potential risk for trafficking.”  
(Government Official)



Antigua and Barbuda’s economy depends heavily on tourism, fisheries, agriculture, and small informal businesses. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), it faces disproportionate exposure to climate impacts despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions.

The research conducted by Free the Slaves (FTS) and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) finds that climate change is generating multi-dimensional and mutually interconnected vulnerabilities that may ultimately heighten exposure to human exploitation.

# Climate Change-Induced Vulnerabilities

## Loss of Livelihoods

Economic reliance on climate-sensitive sector makes livelihoods highly vulnerable to climate shocks.

Extreme weather events damage hotels, service-related workplaces, fishery and agriculture, immediately creating an income loss across formal and informal sectors.

Dependence on imports also increases exposure to maritime disruption. Rough seas and storm damage can halt shipping for weeks, limiting goods for consumption and commerce. Food vendors and small entrepreneurs lose income when supplies cannot arrive.

Income loss increases the risk of poverty. Women, particularly single mothers, are disproportionately affected because more represented in tourism and small businesses.



## Health

Climate change affects health through direct, indirect, and diffuse pathways. Direct impacts include heat stress and injuries from extreme weather events. Indirect impacts stem from saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers, contributing to waterborne disease and reduced safe drinking water. Diffuse impacts include deteriorating mental health and psychosocial well-being following repeated disasters and economic instability.

Vulnerabilities are heightened for populations facing barriers to healthcare access, including members of the LGBTQI+ community.

## Housing

Extreme weather causes widespread residential damage, including to traditional chattel houses, resulting in displacement and overcrowding. Damage to public infrastructure also disrupts water, sanitation, electricity, and transportation.

Rising climate risks increase home insurance costs, construction expenses, and maintenance burdens. Saltwater intrusion accelerates structural degradation. Sea-level rise is likely to force relocation away from coastal areas, posing significant social and financial challenges.

## Human Mobility

Climate pressures contribute to internal displacement and cross-border movement. Approximately 3,366 people in Antigua are at risk of displacement annually from sudden-onset hazards, particularly those living in informal settlements and low-lying coastal areas.

Displacement disrupts livelihoods, education, and social networks, weakening protective community structures.

## Education

Extreme weather events damage schools and displace students. When schools are not damaged, they may need to be repurposed as public shelters.

Many education facilities lack climate-resilient infrastructure, including adequate ventilation, affecting concentration and productivity during extreme heat.

Additionally, persistent disruption increases dropout risk and vulnerability to recruitment into criminal activities.

## Food and Water Insecurity

Drought and saltwater intrusion intensify water scarcity, while declining fish stocks and reduced agricultural productivity undermine food systems. Heavy reliance on imported food increases exposure to maritime disruptions. Rising food and water insecurity deepens household financial strain and reduces coping capacity.

# How Climate Vulnerability Leads to Exploitation

Against this backdrop of compounded vulnerability, the risk of exploitation increases. While loss of livelihood remains the primary driver, other factors—particularly those that deepen poverty—play a significant role, especially for women and girls. Interviewees reported that when climate change undermines income-generating opportunities, some women facing limited alternatives may seek work in local bars, where tasks may extend beyond waitressing to include sexual activity for clients who pay for the “extra service”. As women and girls become economically dependent on such arrangements, they face heightened risks of systematic sexual exploitation by bar managers or intermediaries seeking to maximize profit.

The research also reveals that women and girls are disproportionately exposed to domestic violence. This pattern is closely linked to cultural norms that, under economic strain, may implicitly encourage or exacerbate harmful behaviours. In Antigua and Barbuda, as in many Caribbean societies, men are often socially expected to act as the head of the household and to provide for the family. This role is deeply ingrained, and a man who is unable to fulfil this role can face significant social and psychological pressure. When climate change disrupts livelihoods and undermines this role, feelings of frustration and loss of confidence can manifest in increased alcohol consumption, verbal abuse, and domestic violence.

Interviewees emphasized that men and boys are also vulnerable to exploitation following climate-related events. Many are pushed into informal, low-skilled manual labour, such as construction or gardening. In these roles, it is not uncommon that the employer systematically delays or does not pay their wages. Some boys in their late teens and early twenties are also exploited within the sex industry, although these experiences are less visible and underreported due to social stigma.

# Current Responses

At both national and regional levels, initiatives are underway to address the challenges of climate change and to reduce associated vulnerabilities. In Antigua and Barbuda, the government has introduced a revolving loan programme that enables residents to access low-interest loans to hurricane-proof their homes. Importantly, and in recognition of the gendered impacts of climate change, women—particularly those heading households—are prioritised in the allocation of loans.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) play a critical role, including by building people’s skills in climate change-resilient agriculture, by integrating local and traditional knowledge to strengthen the responsiveness of vulnerable sectors to a changing ecosystem, and by providing psychological support to communities affected by climate-related shocks.

Regionally, bodies such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) are invested in addressing the link between climate change and multi-dimensional vulnerabilities.

However, the research finds that there is still limited understanding of how climate-induced vulnerabilities facilitate human exploitation. As a result, climate responses and anti-exploitation strategies remain insufficiently integrated and coordinated at both national and regional levels.



# Recommendations

## Government of Antigua and Barbuda

- ✓ Invest in climate-resilient infrastructure and secure temporary shelters
- ✓ Strengthen water and food security
- ✓ Integrate climate risk reduction into tourism policy
- ✓ Support livelihood diversification
- ✓ Ensure continuity of education during disruptions
- ✓ Strengthen regional and international cooperation

## Caribbean Community

- ✓ Integrate exploitation considerations into climate and development policy
- ✓ Strengthen regional coordination and implementation

## Civil Society Organizations

- ✓ Conduct pre-disaster education on climate and exploitation risks
- ✓ Advocate for integration of exploitation prevention into national climate planning
- ✓ Support research that strengthens resilience and reduces exploitation risk