

Protecting Children's Environmental Rights in the Face of Environmental Hazards

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ABSTRACT

Children continue to be one of the most vulnerable populations to environmental harm due to their fragile physical development and dependence on stable living conditions. This literature review examines how children's environmental rights are inconsistently implemented and weakly enforced by analyzing international frameworks, policies and real-world situations in various regions, also showing that despite the recognition of children's environmental rights, many children still don't receive consistent protection in practice. First, this literature review analyzes international frameworks to discuss the definition of environmental rights and legal protections for children. Then, through research about gaps between environmental regulations and their implementation in practice, the literature review examines environmental policy enforcement. Afterwards, this research analyzes environmental hazards by looking at previous studies on pollution, climate change, unsafe housing, and health effects on children. This literature review also investigates environmental inequalities based on regional and social aspects by comparing environmental risks across different communities. By analyzing international policies and case studies, existing research indicates that children's environmental rights are not well-protected and are inconsistent across different regions, although they are recognized in international agreements and environmental policies. This research suggests that stronger environmental protections, more consistent policy enforcement, and reduced environmental inequalities are necessary to better protect children's health and development.

INTRODUCTION

Children are among the most vulnerable populations affected by environmental harm, including pollution, unsafe water, and climate change. Because their bodies and immune systems are still developing, children are more sensitive to environmental hazards than adults. Exposure to polluted air, contaminated water, and environmental toxins can have long-term effects on children's health and development. Although international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognize children's right to a healthy environment, many children continue to face environmental conditions that threaten their health and development. This gap between the recognition of children's

environmental rights and their enforcement in practice raises an important question about how well children's environmental rights are actually protected.

This paper explores children's environmental rights through international laws, the effects of environmental hazards on children's health, variations in protection across regions, and the effectiveness of policies in practice. Research on international agreements, such as the UNCRC, explains children's rights related to health, education, and development. Other studies focus on environmental hazards, including pollution and unsafe water, and show how these risks directly affect children's health. There are also sources focusing on different regions that also demonstrate that environmental conditions and protections for children vary widely across countries.

However, while existing studies discuss environmental risks and policies meant to mitigate these risks, there is limited research that directly evaluates how effective these protections are in practice for children. While international frameworks openly acknowledge children's environmental rights, this research reveals that these rights remain inconsistently implemented and weakly enforced, which continues to leave environmental hazards affecting children through pollution, disease subjection, climate change, and unsafe housing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Children's Environmental Rights in International Frameworks

Children's environmental rights are becoming more recognized in international law, but this recognition often remains broad and not fully specific to children's needs. Makuch et al. explain that children are more vulnerable to environmental harm due to their developmental stage, which makes general environmental protections insufficient for addressing their risks. Makuch et al. argue that children should be expressly included in environmental policies rather than treated as part of the general population because children experience environmental harm differently from adults. In addition, the authors also highlight that environmental issues such as pollution and unsafe living conditions directly interfere with children's rights to health, education, and development. These observations about children's rights suggest that environmental rights are not separate from other rights but are necessary for children to fully access their basic protections. However, many existing legal frameworks still fail to clearly define or enforce children's environmental rights in practice, which weakens their effectiveness. Generally, Makuch et al. demonstrate that although children's environmental rights are recognized in theory, children's environmental rights are not yet clearly structured or consistently protected in international law, which creates gaps in real-world protection (Makuch et al. 204-208).

Similarly, Daly examines how children's environmental rights are interpreted within existing legal frameworks, especially through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Daly argues that although the UNCRC does not explicitly state a right to a healthy environment, it can be

interpreted to include this right because environmental harm directly impacts children's fundamental rights such as health and development. As a result, this connection shows that environmental protection is necessary for ensuring children can fully exercise their recognized rights. Daly also emphasizes that governments have a responsibility to consider environmental conditions when making decisions that affect children's well-being because policies related to housing, pollution, water safety, and climate directly influence children's health and development. This argument suggests that protecting children's rights is not limited to healthcare or education alone, since environmental conditions impact if children can safely access rights such as the right to health, safe housing, clean water, and education in their daily lives. Furthermore, Daly expands this idea through the concept of intergenerational rights, which highlights that environmental damage affects both current and future generations of children, additionally increasing the importance of long-term environmental protection. By connecting environmental conditions to children's rights to health, development, and safe living environments, Daly demonstrates that environmental harm can directly prevent children from fully accessing their basic rights, which is why environmental protection is necessary for supporting children's well-being and future opportunities for education and healthy development in practice. Ultimately, Daly's research demonstrates that while legal frameworks can support children's environmental rights, the lack of explicit recognition and enforcement limits their effectiveness in practice. Makuch et al. highlight why children require environmental protections that address their vulnerabilities, and Daly explains how international legal frameworks try to recognize those protections but still leave significant gaps in their definition and enforcement. Together, these studies demonstrate that international recognition of children's environmental rights has expanded, but legal protections remain insufficient to ensure the consistency of children's environmental rights protection in practice (Daly 134-147).

Gaps Between Environmental Policies and the Actual Protection of Children's Rights

The effectiveness of environmental protection for children depends not only on how policies are written, but also on how consistently they are enforced in practice. Sullivan et al. examine environmental policy development in the United States and show that, despite existing regulations, children continue to face unequal exposure to environmental hazards due to weak enforcement and shifting political priorities. The authors describe how reductions in funding changes in regulatory priorities have limited efforts to reduce children's exposure to air and water pollution. As a result, many environmental protections exist in policy but aren't fully maintained or enforced in practice, which lets harmful environmental conditions continue affecting children's daily lives. Sullivan et al. also note that early exposure to environmental hazards contributes to long-term physical and cognitive harm, which demonstrates that inconsistent enforcement can have lasting effects on children's health and development over time. In addition, the study portrays how government programs such as lead monitoring initiatives, clean drinking water regulations, and air quality inspections are enforced more consistently in wealthier communities than in low-income areas, a pattern that lowers their effectiveness and leaves children in poorer neighborhoods at greater risk for asthma, lead exposure, and other pollution-related health problems. The uneven enforcement of environmental protections supports the idea that policies alone are not sufficient, because without consistent government support and enforcement, children's environmental rights policies fail to protect

children in practice. Children's continued exposure to environmental hazards caused by weaker regulations suggests that legal frameworks alone cannot effectively protect children's environmental rights without consistent implementation and enforcement (Sullivan et al. 125-136).

While Sullivan et al. focus on the limitations of policy enforcement, Noor et al. examine how these gaps directly affect children from a human rights perspective. Furthermore, Noor et al. explain that environmental conditions, such as lack of clean water, poor sanitation, and poor nutrition contribute to long-term developmental issues, including stunted growth and greater health risks. Because these environmental conditions directly affect children's physical development and overall well-being, Noor et al. argue that governments have the legal responsibility to provide safe, environmental conditions, and protect children's rights to health and development. Their argument that governments must ensure access to clean water, proper sanitation systems, and sufficient nutrition suggests that environmental protection is not only a public health issue but also a legal and human rights responsibility. Noor et al. further explain that failure to address environmental problems can also create long-term consequences for the society as a whole, since poor childhood health and development can affect education, economic stability, and quality of life in the future. In addition, the study connects environmental conditions to legal accountability by emphasizing that environmental protections are only effective when governments consistently enforce policies and take responsibility for the reduction of harmful conditions. Noor et al. demonstrate that without proper accountability for the enforcement, environmental protections often remain very ineffective, which later leaves many children exposed to unsafe living conditions. Moreover, this research shows how failures in regulating industrial pollution and enforcing clear air and water standards can also become failures to protect children's rights to health, safe housing, clean water, and physical development in practice (Noor et al. 13-18).

The disconnect between environmental policies and the actual protection of children's rights can also be seen in legal cases that reveal how environmental decisions affect children in practice. For example, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child case *M.E.V., S.E.V., and B.I.V. v. Sweden* provides a specific example of how environmental decisions can affect children's rights. The case involved government approval of mineral exploration in areas affecting Indigenous communities, raising concerns about environmental harm and its impact on children's well-being. As a result, the UN Committee found that environmental decisions can interfere with children's rights to culture, identity, and participation, particularly when communities are excluded from decision-making processes. In addition, the Committee emphasized that environmental decisions affecting Indigenous communities must consider children's rights to culture, participation, and identity, especially when environmental harm threatens traditional ways of life. Furthermore, the Committee's observations on Indigenous children's cultural rights and participation in environmental decision-making suggests that environmental policies can directly affect children's rights when governments fail to consider long-term environmental consequences or exclude affected communities from decision making processes. Ultimately, the case demonstrates that effective environmental protection depends not only on strong policies, but also on whether children's rights are taken into account when environmental decisions are made (UN Committee 1-15).

Environmental Hazards and Their Effects on Children's Health and Living Conditions

Environmental hazards can have serious effects on children's health and development, especially because children are more vulnerable to environmental exposure than adults. In their research, Stokes et al. explain that children are more vulnerable to environmental risks due to biological and developmental factors, such as higher breathing rates and developing immune systems. As a result of these factors, children are more exposed to pollutants in air, water, and soil, which can lead to serious health problems such as respiratory illnesses and developmental delays. Stokes et al. also explain that environmental exposure can create long-term consequences, including chronic disease and impaired cognitive development, because children continue to experience environmental risks throughout important stages of physical and mental development. By connecting these health effects to broader environmental conditions such as climate-related events and extreme environments, Stokes et al. demonstrate that environmental hazards affect children throughout their long-term development and future well-being, not only in their present. The research by Stokes et al. demonstrates that children are more vulnerable to environmental hazards, which can affect their long-term health and development, signaling the need for stronger environmental protections (Stokes et al. 20-23).

Although Stokes et al. emphasize the consequences of environmental harm, Afzal et al. allude to how everyday environmental conditions affect children's daily health and routines through a children's asthma case study. Afzal et al. identify factors such as air pollution, poor housing conditions, and unsafe school environments as direct contributors to health problems like asthma and increased school absences. Rather than occurring only during major environmental disasters, these risks are part of children's daily environments, meaning that exposure is continuous rather than occasional. Due to this constant exposure to environmental hazards, Afzal et al. argue that it is more effective to address environmental conditions early than to wait until harm has already occurred. The authors also explain that policy decisions play a major role in shaping children's environments because government regulations determine factors such as air quality standards, housing conditions, and protections against environmental exposure, which directly affect how much harm children can experience. By showing how children are exposed to environmental risks in their everyday lives, Afzal et al. suggest that environmental harm is connected not only to health problems, but also to government decisions that shape the conditions children live in (Afzal et al. 209-211).

While Afzal et al. and Stokes et al. focus on the immediate health effects of environmental hazards, Sanson & Burke expand this discussion by focusing on environmental problems affecting children's long-term development and the well-being of future generations. The authors argue that environmental problems create risks not only for children today but also for future generations, meaning that current environmental decisions have permanent consequences. This idea goes beyond just discussing immediate health concerns of children's environmental rights by showing that environmental protection also affects children's long-term quality of life and ability to access education, maintain stable housing, and grow up in safe communities with enough food and water supplies in the future. Sanson and Burke explain that

climate change affects access to essential resources such as food, clean water, and safe housing, which are necessary for children's well-being. For example, environmental changes like droughts and extreme weather can reduce food availability and damage infrastructure, which can limit children's access to basic needs and make their daily life unstable. In addition, Sanson and Burke introduce the concept of intergenerational justice to argue that present-day policies should not harm the rights and well-being of future children. By connecting environmental decisions to both present and future generations, the research suggests that governments have a responsibility to consider the long-term effects of environmental policies on children's rights and development. The idea that environmental decisions can affect both current and future generations extends past short-term health concerns because environmental protection also influences children's long-term quality of life and their future. This idea shifts the focus away from just immediate health impacts and shows that environmental harm can have long-term effects on future generations. In general, Sanson & Burke's research suggests that protecting children's environmental rights means governments must also consider how today's decisions could affect future generations of children, and not only current environmental harms (Sanson & Burke 343-350). Ultimately, because children are continuously exposed to acute and chronic environmental risks, effective protection of their rights depends on consistent government action, including early prevention strategies and strong enforcement to limit ongoing exposure.

Unequal Environmental Risks: How Protection of Children's Rights Varies Across Regions and Social Groups

Environmental risks for children do not affect all regions equally, and these differences are closely tied to infrastructure, access to resources, and the level of government support. For example, Mathee et al. study children's environmental health in South Africa, focusing on how limited access to clean water, proper sanitation, and safe housing increases children's exposure to polluted air and contaminated environments. Given the limited access to basic infrastructure, such as clean water, sanitation systems, and safe housing, children in low-income communities are more likely to develop respiratory diseases and waterborne illnesses. In addition, environmental protections are often not strongly enforced, which means issues such as polluted water systems, unsafe disposal sites, and poor air quality in residential areas expose children to harmful environmental conditions without much action being taken to address these problems. As a result, many children living in low-income communities remain exposed to environmental risks over long periods of time, which worsens their overall health and development. By showing how limited access to clean water, sanitation, safe housing, and environmental protections affect children in South Africa, Mathee et al. suggest that weak support from the government can increase children's exposure to environmental risks. In summary, Mathee et al. 's research shows that inequalities in access to infrastructure, environmental protections, and public support can increase children's exposure to environmental hazards and make it harder to protect their environmental rights (Mathee et al. 284-287).

While Mathee et al. focus on how environmental inequality affects children specifically in South Africa, UNICEF compares children's environmental risks and access to essential resources across countries worldwide. Investigating children's environmental rights on a global scale, UNICEF analyzes patterns

using the Children's Climate Risk Index, which compares countries based on children's exposure to environmental hazards and their access to essential services. The data reveals that children living in lower-income countries face much higher risks, not only because of environmental conditions but also due to limited healthcare, unsafe water, and weaker education systems. In many cases, governments in these regions lack the resources or capacity to respond effectively, which leaves children more vulnerable. UNICEF's comparison of countries with different levels of environmental risk and access to resources demonstrates that children's exposure to environmental harm is shaped by economic inequality and differences in government support and policy decisions. The global comparison by UNICEF also suggests that protecting children's environmental rights depends not just on reducing hazards themselves, but on improving access to resources and strengthening government action (UNICEF 13-18). Overall, these sources demonstrate that children's environmental risks are shaped heavily by economic inequalities, access to basic resources, and the amount of government support, meaning that children in low-income regions often face higher exposure to environmental harm and weaker protection of their environmental rights.

METHODS

This literature review was developed by examining academic articles, legal frameworks, policy reports, and case studies related to children's environmental rights. Then, sources were organized into major themes based on recurring topics across the literature to organize the analysis. Sources for this literature review were collected primarily through the EBSCO database and Google Scholar, unless noted otherwise. The searches were conducted in February 2026, through keywords including: children's environmental rights, environmental justice, children's health and environment, environmental policy, climate change, environmental inequality, and children's human rights. Afterwards, sources were selected based on their relevance on the topic, credibility, and their ability to address legal frameworks and policies that affect children's environmental rights. The selected sources were then organized into several major themes that together provide a thorough examination of how children's environmental rights are recognized, enforced, and experienced in practice.

Using this organization of sources, this literature review examines how effectively children's environmental rights are protected internationally through the analysis of academic research, legal frameworks, and environmental policy discussions. The paper utilizes a literature review approach because children's environmental rights affect many areas of children's daily lives, including health, education, housing, environmental safety, and access to resources. A literature review approach allowed for comparison of legal frameworks, environmental conditions, and government responses across different regions, which helped provide a better understanding of the challenges that affect children's environmental rights in practice.

To address the research question, this literature review is organized into several major areas that examine together how children's environmental rights are recognized, enforced, and are experienced by children in

practice. First, this paper explores international legal frameworks and definitions of children's environmental rights in order to examine how environmental protections are recognized within international human rights discussions. Next, the paper reviews environmental policy enforcement to examine the gap between protections written in legal frameworks and the reality of children's living conditions. The literature review then examines environmental hazards and their effects on children's health and development in order to understand how environmental harm directly affects children. Finally, the paper analyzes environmental inequality across different regions and communities to examine how economic conditions, infrastructure, and government support influence children's exposure to environmental risks. One limitation of this approach is that a literature review cannot fully examine how specific environmental policies are implemented or enforced within individual countries because the approach relies primarily on existing research rather than direct policy analysis. As a result, this approach provides a broad understanding of global patterns and challenges but offers less details about specific government responses and local environmental conditions.

RESULTS

The literature demonstrates that children's environmental rights are recognized internationally but are not consistently protected in practice. Research on international frameworks demonstrates that organizations such as the United Nations and environmental agencies acknowledge that children require special protection from environmental harm because of their vulnerability and dependence on safe living conditions (Makuch et al. 205-206). The literature also shows that environmental rights are closely connected to children's rights to health, development, education, and safe living environments. However, many sources, such as Daly, Sullivan et al., and others, found that existing legal frameworks often fail to clearly define or consistently enforce children's environmental rights in practice (Daly 136; Sullivan et al. 130-131). Overall, research on international frameworks suggests that although children's environmental rights are increasingly recognized internationally, legal protections alone do not guarantee consistent enforcement in practice.

Furthermore, research on environmental policy enforcement reveals major gaps between environmental protections written in policies and the actual reality of children's living conditions. Several studies, e.g., Sullivan et al. and Noor, show that governments often fail to fully enforce environmental regulations, which allows pollution, unsafe housing, contaminated water, and climate-related risks to continue affecting children's daily lives (Sullivan et al. 124-134; Noor 10-20). In addition, legal cases and policy discussions demonstrate that children and affected communities are often excluded from environmental policy discussions, limiting the effectiveness of protections intended to support children's rights. Together, these studies found that environmental protections are often enforced inconsistently and that many governments struggle to fully implement protections intended to support children's environmental rights.

Similarly, research by Stokes et al., Sanson & Burke, and Afzal et al. demonstrates that children are especially vulnerable to air pollution, toxic chemicals, climate change, poor sanitation, and unsafe living

conditions because these environmental risks can affect physical development, respiratory health, education, and long-term well-being. The literature also reveals that environmental risks are not experienced equally across regions. Studies by Mathee and UNICEF focus on lower-income communities and developing countries found that limited access to healthcare, sanitation, clean water, and government support increases children's exposure to environmental harm and weakens the protection of their rights. Overall, research on environmental inequality suggests that children in lower-income communities often face greater environmental risks because of weaker infrastructure and unequal access to resources and protections.

Finally, the literature reveals several contradictions and gaps across the sources. While many studies emphasize the growing international recognition of children's environmental rights, other sources show that these protections are often inconsistently applied or weakly enforced in practice. Some research presents optimistic developments in environmental policy and international cooperation, while other studies demonstrate that many children continue to experience dangerous environmental conditions despite these efforts. In addition, certain regions and communities are represented more heavily in the available research than others, which creates gaps in perspectives about environmental rights enforcement and limits detailed comparisons between all regions. Across all the sections, the literature found that children's environmental rights are recognized internationally, even though the level of environmental protection and its enforcement varies across different regions and communities.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed studies suggest that children's environmental rights are not effectively protected worldwide, despite increasing international recognition of these rights. The research consistently demonstrated that environmental hazards such as air pollution, contaminated water, unsafe housing, climate change, and toxic exposure negatively affect children's health, development, and quality of life. Because children are physically and socially more vulnerable than adults, environmental harm often creates stronger long-term consequences for them, including respiratory disease, developmental problems, educational disruptions, and increased health inequalities. Although international organizations and environmental policies acknowledge the importance of protecting children from environmental harm, the literature shows that many governments fail to consistently enforce these protections. The findings therefore suggest that environmental rights protections remain uneven and depend heavily on political commitment, economic resources, and access to public health infrastructure.

The results presented herein demonstrate how close the relationship is between environmental justice, children's rights, and global inequality (Makuch et al. 203-214; Daly 132-154; Mathee et al. 283-293; UNICEF 4-125). The research highlights that environmental problems are not only scientific or health-related issues but also social and political issues that directly affect vulnerable populations. Children living in poverty, marginalized communities, or developing countries face greater environmental risks while often receiving the least protection and support from governments. In addition, the literature

emphasizes that stronger environmental protections could improve children's health outcomes, educational opportunities, and long-term well-being, since continued exposure to pollution, unsafe housing, contaminated water, and climate-related disasters can limit children's physical development, access to education, and future quality of life. Academically, this research contributes to discussions in fields such as international human rights, environmental policy, and global studies through examining how environmental protections are connected to children's rights and by highlighting the gap between international legal frameworks and their enforcement in practice. The findings also suggest that future environmental policies should focus not only on creating regulations but also on improving enforcement, increasing access to resources, and reducing inequalities between regions and social groups.

Existing gaps in the literature review also demonstrate the need for additional research on children's environmental rights, particularly in areas involving long-term policy enforcement, regional inequalities, and the experiences of affected communities. Many of the sources focus on broad international trends rather than detailed case studies from individual countries, which limited the ability to closely compare specific government responses or environmental conditions. In addition, there is significantly more research available on certain regions than others, which means that some perspectives and experiences are more represented within the literature review than others. Another limitation of this research is the broad global scope of the topic, since children's rights involve many different legal systems, environmental conditions, and political responses across regions. Because of this wide scope, the literature review could not examine every country or environmental issue in equal depth, which may limit the amount of detail about specific regional experiences and government responses. Future studies could focus more specifically on individual countries, local communities, or particular environmental hazards in order to better understand which policies are most effective at protecting children's environmental rights. More focused research would let researchers examine how environmental protections are applied in specific contexts, why certain policies succeed or fail in practice, and how local economic, political, and social conditions influence children's access to safe living environments and basic rights. Additional research could also examine long-term solutions for improving environmental enforcement, reducing inequalities, and strengthening international accountability for children's environmental protection. In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that although children's environmental rights are recognized internationally, unequal enforcement of policies, environmental inequality, and lack of government accountability continue to prevent many children from receiving consistent protection in practice.

CONCLUSION

This literature review examines how effectively children's environmental rights are protected worldwide and found that, although these rights are recognized through international frameworks and environmental policies, protections remain inconsistent in practice. Environmental hazards, such as pollution, housing, climate change, and limited access to resources, continue to unequally affect vulnerable children, especially in lower-income communities and regions with weaker governmental enforcement of environmental protections. Furthermore, the literature emphasizes how weak enforcement of

environmental laws, slow government responses to contamination, and unequal access to healthcare and clean living conditions can harm children's physical health, development, and long-term quality of life. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discussions in international human rights and environmental policy because it highlights how children's rights are directly influenced by environmental conditions. More specifically, this research exposes the disconnect between international legal recognition of children's environmental rights and the consistency of the enforcement of environmental protections in the actual world. In practice, the research suggests that environmental protections for children cannot rely only on extensive international agreements, since protections are ineffective when governments consistently fail to enforce them for long periods of time. Instead, environmental policies should put more focus on children's daily living conditions and improvement of access to clean water, safe housing, healthcare, sanitation, and preventing pollution in vulnerable communities. The research also suggests that children and affected communities should be more involved in how environmental policies are created because many environmental risks continue when governments overlook the long-term effects of environmental harm on children's health, development, and overall well-being.

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