

P O L I C Y B R I E F

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The Potential of Rural Women to tackle Climate Crisis and Food Security

Executive Summary

The climate crisis is a critical global challenge, and unlocking the potential of rural women is an indispensable strategy to address it. Rural women are often at the forefront of agricultural production, disaster prevention and food security, yet they are disproportionately affected by climate change and face significant barriers to adapting to its impacts. By recognising rural women, not just as vulnerable beneficiaries

but as powerful agents of change, and by systematically addressing the barriers they face, we can unlock their immense potential to build more resilient rural communities, alleviate disaster risks, and ensure food security for all.

To unlock this potential, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Key recommendations focus on six critical areas:

- **Access to resources and assets:** Securing land rights, providing tailored financial services, and ensuring access to appropriate technology
- **Knowledge, information and skills:** Delivering gender-sensitive agricultural extension, implementing intercultural training programmes, and promoting digital literacy
- **Empowerment and decision-making:** Ensuring women's participation in governance and supporting women's collectives to challenge discriminatory gender norms
- **Solidarity-based community building:** Fostering community dialogue, building collaborative management structures, and promoting family and household justice
- **Climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and diversification:** Encouraging sustainable farming practices and supporting women's participation in higher-value agricultural markets and livelihoods
- **Disaster preparedness:** Integrating women into formal early warning systems (EWS), adopting proactive financial strategies, and involving women in community-led response planning.

Introduction

Rural women are essential to building a sustainable future. Their roles as primary food producers, knowledge holders and community organisers make them central to tackling the climate crisis and ensuring food security.

In many parts of the world, women comprise a large portion of the agricultural labour force, particularly in smallholder farming and subsistence agriculture. Globally, 36% of women are employed in agrifood systems – a figure that rises to 66% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 71% in Southern Asia (FAO, 2021). Despite this, a significant productivity gap exists; if women had the same access to productive resources as men, farm yields could increase by **20 to 30%**, potentially feeding an additional **100 to 150 million people** (FAO, 2011).

Rural women possess deep, intergenerational and context-based knowledge of local ecosystems, traditional farming practices, and water management. Their knowledge is invaluable for developing locally appropriate and effective climate adaptation strategies. This body of wisdom is a critical tool for making informed decisions on crop selection and resource management in the face of climate shocks.

The disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care work on women, which includes fetching water, cooking and caring

for others, is often exacerbated by the climate crisis and directly impacts the food security and health of their households. It remains a fundamental obstacle to women's equal participation in decision-making spaces and food security programmes.

Despite facing constraints, women often organise community-level initiatives, share knowledge, and innovate solutions to local challenges. However, their official representation remains low: women hold less than 20% of land ownership globally (UN Women, 2019).

The climate crisis impacts, including droughts, floods, extreme weather, and pest outbreaks, disproportionately affect women due to pre-existing inequalities. Compounding this, a 1°C increase in long-term average temperatures is associated with a 34% reduction in the total incomes of female-headed households relative to male-headed households (FAO, 2023).

Women also have less access to critical resources like land ownership as women own less than 20% of the world's land (UN Women, 2019). Women are **10% less likely** than men to own a cell phone (GSMA, 2023) and have significantly lower access to agricultural credit and technology (FAO, 2011). This limits their ability to invest in adaptive measures.

Unlocking the Potential: Key Recommendations

To unlock the full potential of rural women, a multi-faceted approach is needed that addresses both their vulnerabilities and their

strengths. These key recommendations focus on six vital areas:

- 1. Access to resources and assets:** Strengthen women's access to resources and assets by securing women's land tenure and inheritance rights, providing tailored financial services like microfinance and credit, and ensuring availability of affordable, labour-saving technologies, such as drought-resistant seeds and efficient irrigation. In Mali and Madagascar, the Women Empowerment for Resilient Rural Areas (WE4R) project supports female leaders by strengthening their 3Rs: rights, resources, and representation. The project provides women with leadership training and helps them secure land rights and equal access to financing and technologies. This ensures they have the foundational assets needed to lead both economic and climate initiatives in their territories¹.
- 2. Knowledge, information, and skills:** Deliver agricultural extension services that equip women with knowledge, information, and skills – particularly on climate-smart agriculture and weather forecasting. Implement intercultural training programmes on sustainable farming techniques and promoting digital literacy to enable access to real-time climate information and online learning resources. The NANUM Mujeres Conectadas (Women-Connected) project in Argentina-Paraguay-Bolivia is focused on meaningful connectivity, which goes far beyond simply providing internet access. Through holistic digital literacy, the project trains women to be digital entrepreneurs and community leaders. The women own and manage the connectivity centres, turning technology access into a sustainable business model. Using traditional knowledge combined with technology, women are empowered to combine their traditional knowledge of the land with digital tools for climate adaptation. Through this approach, the project demonstrates that climate resilience is not just about mitigation but about empowering rural communities to become more adaptable and sustainable².
- 3. Empowerment and decision-making:** Ensure women's meaningful participation and leadership in governance, supporting women's collectives and addressing discriminatory social norms that limit their access to resources, as well as their ability to make independent decisions. The Tissaliwine Union of Cooperatives in Morocco, founded by rural women, was able to empower women through economic autonomy, facilitating the production and sale of argan oil. By working together, the 1,200 women members have transitioned from being low-wage workers to business owners. The cooperative offers them stable employment, training, and financial independence, enabling them to have a stronger voice in household decisions, improving gender equality at the local level³.
- 4. Solidarity-based community building:** Focus on fostering community dialogue to recognise women's contributions and building collaborative management structures that strengthen economic stability. Promote family and household justice by providing care services and encouraging partners to get involved in support systems. UN Women programmes in Tajikistan train rural women to start their own businesses. These initiatives go beyond just offering micro-credits; they also provide business skills training and connect women with essential support networks. This holistic approach helps them achieve true economic independence, rather than just temporary financial relief⁴.

1. https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2024_en_GP_WE4R_factsheet.pdf

2. <https://mujeresn anum.org/en/home/>

3. <https://www.terroirdumaroc.gov.ma/terroir-du-maroc>

4. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/1/from-where-i-stand-kursanali-kyzy-begimai>

5. **Climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and diversification:** Promote the adoption of practices like agroecology and sustainable water management, supporting women's participation in higher-value segments of agricultural value chains, and encouraging them to create small businesses to develop economic resilience. In Bali, women farmer's groups (Kelompok Wanita Tani) are integrating the UNESCO-recognised Subak irrigation system – a traditional community governance model – with organic farming and climate-smart agriculture. This approach preserves biodiversity, strengthens women's leadership in farming, and provides sustainable livelihoods through premium organic markets. Indonesia's experience demonstrates how cultural heritage can be combined with modern resilience strategies to address climate and food security challenges⁵.
6. **Disaster preparedness:** Integrate women into formal early warning systems (EWS) to create timely and localised alerts. This would involve implementing proactive financial strategies and involving women in community-led response planning. Practical Action's research in Nepal and Peru shows that community-led EWS are highly effective. By involving communities directly, these systems build trust and ensure warnings are acted upon. Key elements of this approach include hands-on, community-led drills, which build confidence and give people the ability to respond to future events. Additionally, involving trusted local leaders, such as village chiefs, increases the trustworthiness of the EWS, which is particularly important for women, who often rely on informal networks for information. The EWS in Nepal also improved the lead time for flood preparation, allowing people to pre-position essential resources like food and water. Ultimately, these systems serve as a gateway to broader resilience building by strengthening community networks and creating opportunities for women's leadership⁶.

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