

TO ACT ON CLIMATE, EMPOWER WOMEN

Lessons on Supporting Women Leading Climate Action

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Women's Role in Climate Action

Women are crucial for climate action in informal settings¹. They play significant roles in activities like water management, sanitation, urban agriculture, food security, and environmental protection—often in addition to child and elder care responsibilities. They are the backbone of vulnerable communities, and, in the face of climate change, expected to shoulder the burden of adaptation, survival, and recovery. Between 2017 and 2021, ADAPTO supported 22 bottom-up initiatives and followed 17 local leaders (mostly women) in informal settings in Colombia, Chile, Haiti, and Cuba. The aim was to explore responses to climate change and disaster risk. ADAPTO's research findings show that in informal settings women are actively leading climate action (see bottom right).

However, the role women play is often taken for granted. ADAPTO's findings showed that several obstacles prevent women from assuming more decisive roles in climate action: they face discrimination in patriarchal structures and traditional roles, which limits their capacity to lead change; they are frequent victims of violence and aggression, which undermines their health and wellbeing, and often gets little attention after disasters; additionally, their communities are not fully aware of climate change and disaster risk reduction, which inhibits adaptation strategies. These factors also limit women's ability to influence policy and formal decision-making.

This brief addresses how women in informal settings can be better supported as climate action leaders. It contains lessons and best practices that can help governments and non-government organizations (NGOs) improve their support of women-led initiatives.

1. Informal settings, for ADAPTO, refers to the time, places, and circumstances in which people use their own initiative—outside or in parallel to institutionalized procedures and standards—to respond to local conditions, secure access to shelter, livelihoods, or services, and improve their general wellbeing in the face of hostile conditions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Provide psychosocial attention to overcome trauma and build resilience.



Provide training to build knowledge and skills in climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction.



Support the creation of women-led community action groups to enact a collective strategy and protect women leaders.



Provide continued organizational support to sustain initiatives long term.



In Salgar, Colombia, women play a crucial role in building the social networks that make adaptation strategies possible.



In Carahatas, Cuba, women organize community action groups to work on risk management and disaster recovery.

Ways to Support Women's Leadership in Climate Action



First Things First Provide Space for Psychosocial Support

Women in informal settlements often lead climate action while suffering from trauma and psychological distress. This can stem from disasters, violence, displacement, and/or crime. It can also be due to historical marginalization in patriarchal structures and traditional roles. In such contexts, psychosocial attention can promote changes from the inside out. It can help women overcome past traumas and address health and recovery needs related to violence and marginalization. In addition, it can help them become better prepared to cope with a potential future tragedy. It can also be an opportunity to reinterpret and strengthen women's roles in their families and communities.

Government agencies and NGOs play central roles in facilitating the capacity of women to overcome psychological distress and lead climate action. When conducting this work, important considerations include:

- **Engage social workers and psychologists from the outset.** Design activities with the aid of organizations that have experience working with victims of violence, displacement, and disasters.
- **Co-create activities with local leaders and community members** instead of prescribing agendas.
- **Design spaces for expressing emotions, undergoing healing, and hosting social gatherings,** artistic activities, performances, and presentations.
- **Identify an optimal time**—adequately spaced from traumatic events—to organize such activities and meet disaster survivors.

Lessons from Practice

Psychosocial Interventions in Salgar, Colombia

Between 2015 and 2018, heavy rains caused torrential floods and landslides in Salgar, which killed almost 100 people and destroyed multiple residential areas. In 2020, ADAPTO partnered with *Corporación Antioquia Presente*, an NGO with more than 30 years of experience working with victims of violence, displacement, and disasters. They offered psychosocial workshops to about 350 families (1000 people) affected by the disaster, which included a significant number of women. They explored issues of identity, local ways of life, female empowerment, responses to the topography and weather, and prepared to cope with a potential future tragedy. The women that participated also acted as family representatives when receiving housing solutions during the reconstruction process. This highlighted and reinterpreted their role in the family and community. In this case, psychosocial support helped women move away from previously passive roles while contributing to their leadership of informal initiatives.





Knowledge is Power Provide Training in Climate Action

In many cases, women in informal settings—along with their communities—are understandably not fully aware of climate change effects, disaster risk, and solutions in disaster management. Providing training in disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation can improve the knowledge and skills of women and their communities. More awareness about climate change and the best adaptive practices can also facilitate women's participation in policy making. Developing and implementing accessible training programs is a key component of successful bottom-up initiatives.

When providing climate action training, considerations for government agencies and NGOs include:

- **Recognize the existing knowledge and needs of leaders and community members**—programs should be based on local challenges, experiences, and socio-cultural particularities.
- **Frame complex issues like climate change adaptation within scenes from everyday life** and use creative tools for reflection and analysis.
- **Encourage participants to assume an active role** in the knowledge and capacity-building process.
- **Utilize 'learning by doing' activities**, where new knowledge is attained through **experimentation, creativity, and critical thinking**. Allow participants to build from personal experiences and use techniques that promote understanding, retention, and appropriation of new knowledge and skills.

Lessons from Practice

Training Workshops in Yumbo, Colombia

In 2020, ADAPTO researchers collaborated with community members of the Las Américas neighbourhood to initiate "*Huertas en Casa*" (*Home Gardens*)—a series of virtual and in-person training activities for environmental education and sustainability in living spaces. Virtual resources were essential to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide continuity of activities. Seven video tutorials were produced that discussed urban vegetable gardens and home gardening. They provided information on household spaces and materials for the construction of vegetable gardens, drip irrigation systems, composting and soil preparation, seeds, pesticides, and natural fertilizers. The virtual training workshops were shared with the community, which resulted in green training and technology development. They displayed the enormous potential of audiovisual media for disseminating activities and conducting workshops and training sessions. In-person workshops were also organized for the construction of home garden prototypes to implement the techniques explored in the virtual workshops. A pilot project for the design and construction of compost bins and containers for separating solid waste at home was initiated with the participation of ten families from the community. After participating, women played a fundamental role in sharing their experiences with their communities.





Strength in Numbers

Create Opportunities for Collective Action

Initiatives led by women in informal settings are mostly undertaken on an individual basis and rarely integrated into a coherent, organized, and collective strategy. But the challenges that women face in these communities cannot be solved individually. Women in informal settings are often in danger, and exposure puts female leaders especially at great physical risk. In some contexts, women do not have much influence in decision-making related to land and risk management, because it is a role traditionally held by men. Despite their influence in individual households, the lack of a collective strategy limits women from similarly influencing policies at the community level. With the strength they hold when acting as a collective, women are even more capable of solving the problems facing their communities.

By supporting the creation of women-led community action groups, government agencies and NGOs can contribute to breaking down traditional gender roles while increasing women's capacity to engage in climate action. In doing so, the following should be taken into consideration:

- **Facilitate autonomous action of women-led groups by providing knowledge and skills** needed to collectively develop their understanding of climate action, influence decision-making, and act on their own terms.
- **Identify change agents in the community** who can mobilize other women around them and reduce dangers faced by isolated female leaders.
- **Raise community awareness as a group** to enhance women's power and recognition in the community.
- **Provide opportunities for women-led groups to influence policy**, enhance women's role in **decision-making**, and affirm the legitimacy of their leadership.

Lessons from Practice

Community Action Group in Carahatas, Cuba

In 2019, ADAPTO researchers collaborated with community members from Carahatas to create "*Mujeres del Mar*" (*Women from the Sea*)—a women-led community action group seeking to raise climate change awareness and strengthen support networks to reduce risk. At the local elementary school, they identified a leader who volunteered to mobilize other teachers and students' mothers. The group planned talks, workshops, and observation tours to acquire knowledge and skills about climate change risks. They also hosted discussion forums to recognize, document, and share the best existing adaptive practices and relevant regulations. To grow community awareness, they planned cultural and educational activities. This included theatre productions and children's shows that illustrated climate change effects and adaptation strategies to residents. The group further engaged in other resource-intensive activities, such as planting mangroves to reduce flood risk along the coast. The group also enhanced women's power and recognition in decision-making roles that are traditionally held by men. They were able to influence land and risk management policies as part of the government's post-hurricane response program. In this way, by joining forces, women became equipped to learn more about climate change, prepare their communities to take preventive action, strengthen their role in the community, and influence policy.





Find a Balance

Promote Women-Led Initiatives & Provide Continued Support

Community leaders must be empowered and given space to act. Too much control from external actors can weaken autonomy, innovation, and creativity among local leaders. Conversely, too little involvement can lead to disintegration of initiatives. The success of bottom-up initiatives relies on the community engaging in the management process from the start, internalizing the exercise as their own, and developing it more autonomously. However, empowering the organizational capacity of communities, and of women, also requires financial and political resources.

In this dynamic, government agencies and NGOs can provide long-term support and stability to initiatives led by women, while still allowing them to take full ownership of these initiatives from the beginning. When taking this approach, the following should be considered:

- **Responsibility for sustaining a partnership should be shared among all partners and formalized in writing.**
- Where there are gaps in funding, **NGOs can provide advice on alternative financing and logistical support**, increasing the capacity of women-led community action to generate greater impacts.
- **Municipalities can take on a follow-up and support role** by consulting women in policy development and providing legitimacy to their projects.
- **Political and organizational support to initiate the project, and constant collaboration** over several years as the project develops **builds trust between leaders and the community.**

Lessons from Practice

Rescuing a Community Garden Project and Solidifying Women's Leadership in Concepción, Chile

Initiated in 2017, ADAPTO's *Vertical Garden* project aimed to strengthen women's leadership and promote food sovereignty for community members from the port city of Tomé. Initially, partners successfully built a pavilion and trained women leaders in horticulture. But, when the QMB ("*Quiero Mi Barrio*"—*I Love My Neighborhood*) program from the Chilean Ministry of Housing and Urbanism ended its contractual relationship with the neighbourhood, it caused a loss of institutional and political support. The municipality delayed implementing the irrigation system required to operate the vertical garden. As a result, the vertical garden became obsolete, unoccupied, and was dismantled. This threatened to erode women's leadership and support in the community built during the project thus far. In response, the sustainable planning NGO *Corporacion Desarrollo ConCiencia* and the *Waste Commission of the Tomé Community Environment Committee*, along with ADAPTO researchers, helped reduce community tensions and rescued the project. They established permanent contact with the local gardeners, which empowered their leadership when the support from QMB receded. The two organizations committed to reinstalling the garden and relaunching activities. They were also able to re-involve the municipality in the initiative. This project shows that with sufficient municipal involvement, compliance with initial commitments, and continued organizational and logistical support, initiatives led by women can be sustained, which is crucial for solidifying women's leadership roles.





Photo: Esteban Villota/ADAPTO-Yumbo, Colombia

A Future Where Women's Role in Climate Action is Recognized and Supported

ADAPTO research has shown that in informal settings many bottom-up climate adaptation strategies are already being initiated and led by women. But they need support on several fronts, including: a) providing psychosocial support to overcome trauma and build resilience; b) delivering training programs—to women and their communities—in climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction that builds on their existing knowledge; c) contributing to the organization of community action groups to strengthen women's initiatives, influence public policy, and protect women leaders; and d) giving long-term organizational support and recognition in the crucial roles that women play during and after natural disasters. By learning from the lessons and examples in this brief, government agencies and NGOs can help create favorable conditions for women leaders in informal settings to engage in climate action. Increasing the participation of women in this way is both a technical necessity and ethical-political imperative in climate action.

ADAPTO researchers uncovered that, to empower women, the traditional power structures that affect their equal participation in the collective sphere must be challenged. Agendas that regulate natural disasters must place greater emphasis on gender-based experiences rather than continue to protect the patriarchal order. There must be a critical rethinking of urban planning perspectives in government agencies to consider a new relationship between genders. Gender approaches must be considered in engineering projects and the development of local policies on disaster management. To aid this work, more sophisticated research is needed on patterns of patriarchy that affect climate action in specific regions. A deeper analysis of feminist approaches to disaster risk reduction, social change, and urban transformation is also required in these regions. In general, the gender patterns in bottom-up initiatives and implementation activities must be studied in greater detail.



ADAPTO is a multidisciplinary research project funded by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and coordinated by the Disaster Resilience and Sustainable Reconstruction Research Alliance (*Œuvre Durable*) from 2017-2021. It investigates climate change adaptation in informal settings in understanding and reinforcing bottom-up initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean. For more information, see: http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en_index.html

Resources

- › Holmes Páez, J. D., Lizarralde, G., Labbé, D., & Herazo, B. (2019) Coping with Disasters in Small Municipalities: Women's Role in the Reconstruction of Salgar, Colombia.
- › Muñoz, L., Páez, H., Lizarralde, G., Labbé, D., & Herazo, B. (2019) Adaptation to Water Scarcity: Water Management Strategies Led by Women on the Caribbean Island of San Andres.
- › Saavedra, J., Rubio Carrasco, C., Valenzuela Contreras, K., & Balboa Jiménez, V. (2019) Local Memory and Climate Disaster Management: Women's Leadership Experience in Nonguén.