

> Fact Sheet | Climate Change & Women



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When natural disasters strike, they hit poor communities first and worst. And since women make up an estimated 70 percent of those living below the poverty line, they are most likely to bear the heaviest burdens. At the same time, women are often left out of the conversation about adapting to climate change, even though they are sometimes in the best position to provide solutions.

In most poor communities, women play dual roles. As providers, they usually work in agriculture or other informal sectors, and they collect food, water, and fuel. As caretakers, they look after the children, sick, and elderly; the home; and the family's assets. As a result, women often have invaluable knowledge about adapting to erratic environmental changes. When women are included equally with men in disaster preparedness training, their survival rates improve.

However, socially constructed roles and responsibilities usually put women at a disadvantage in preparing for climate change. Women have less access to resources, are frequently unable to swim or leave the house unattended, and are less likely to migrate to look for shelter and work when a disaster hits. Statistically, women (and children) are more likely to die than men during disasters.

In addition, after the floods, droughts, and storms, women often encounter domestic and sexual violence and are deprived of essential services. Relief efforts regularly shortchange female health needs, such as obstetrical care. Girls drop out of school to save on school fees or to spend more time fetching water. Taken in combination, these circumstances contribute to a cycle where women are unable to participate in decision-making about climate change solutions.

But it doesn't have to be this way. If women are included in decision-making in their own communities, the special needs of both women and men can be met.

Sameda Banu, a farmer in Bangladesh, says that she's noticed a drastic reduction in rainfall in recent years. She's noticed smaller harvests and less grass in the fields to feed her cows. Her family also has to go far away to collect drinking water, she says.



“Climate change affects women because they are usually the main food producers of crops like rice, millet, vegetables. Because of no rain, climate change affects them. And girls have to drop out of school because they need to start working for their families.”

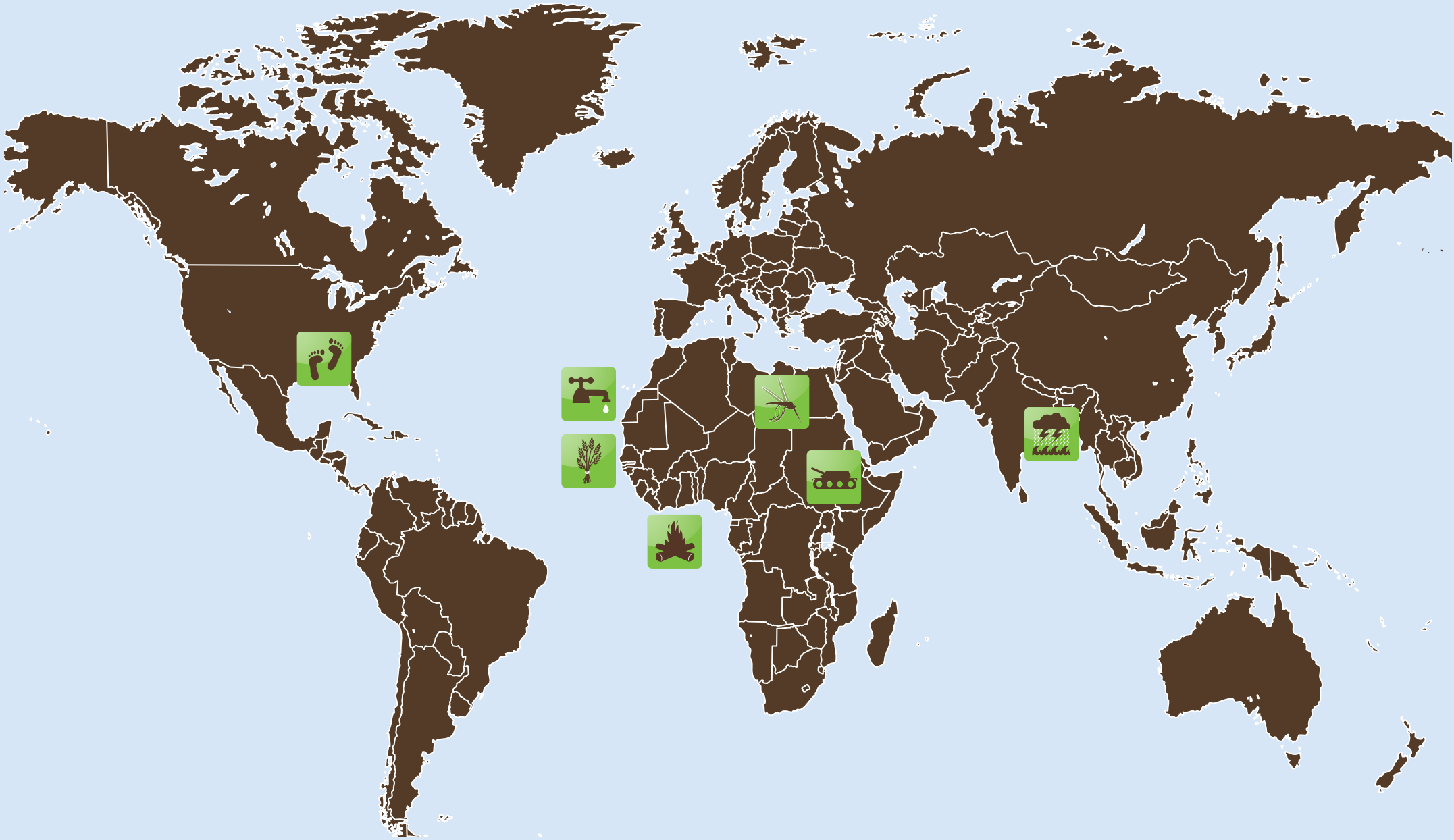
Voré Gana Seck, executive director of Green Senegal and president of the international nongovernmental coalition Conseil des ONG d'Appui au Développement

How can you help women fight climate change?

- > Ask Congress to provide financial and technical assistance to help vulnerable communities. US climate legislation must help poor people here and in developing countries adapt to climate change and build up their resilience. Programs established by legislation should respond to the different impacts climate change has on men and women.
- > Ask Congress to support legislative language that empowers women to make decisions about national climate change plans. US climate legislation must stipulate that women are at the heart of the planning and implementation of adaptation projects so that their roles and resources are taken into account.

Mapping the impacts of climate change on women

Because of their dual roles as providers and caretakers, women experience a long list of consequences when the climate changes. They sometimes feel the effects all at once.



Displacement in the US | The relocation of women after disasters has severe impacts on social support networks, family ties, and coping capacity. Hurricane Katrina created an acute affordable housing shortage throughout the Gulf Coast region, but especially within the city of New Orleans; over 83 percent of poor, single mothers were displaced. Because of this shortage, many women and girls have been unable to return home or must now share accommodations with extended family members or acquaintances.



Clean water shortage in Senegal | Women are responsible for fetching water for the household. The 35 percent decline in rainfall in Senegal has made it harder for women to collect water, particularly in areas where there are no bore wells, no electric wells, or no connection to a water distribution network. Women must now walk long distances to fetch drinkable water because of challenges such as salinity, dry wells, or water impurities.



Crop failure in Senegal | Women are responsible for providing food for the household through crop production. However, increased drought conditions lead to infertile soil, and flooding from unexpected downpours uproots vegetation and crops, which caused agricultural yields to decline in Senegal. Often women and the elderly are left to fend for themselves as young people and men leave in search of profitable work; as a result of this migration, the village of Landou in Senegal, for example, now has about 118 women and only 20 men.



Fuel shortage in Ghana | Women are responsible for collecting fuel for the household. But highly variable precipitation and increased temperatures in some areas of Ghana could lead to water stress on woody plants. This will increase the long hours women and girls spend collecting wood to use as fuel.



Health impacts in the East African Highlands | Women have less access to medical services than men. This has become an increasing problem as variations in the climate have initiated malaria epidemics, which are expected to worsen and spread.



Civil war/conflict in Sudan | Women are often victims of physical and sexual violence in times of war. There are continued reports of displaced women in the Darfur region of Sudan being beaten or sexually assaulted when they leave the crowded camps to collect wood for their cooking fires or fodder for their animals. The conflict in Darfur has been fueled, in part, by competition over scarce farming and grazing lands.



Natural disasters in Bangladesh | More women die in disasters than men. When a cyclone and floods hit Bangladesh in 1991, the death rate for women was almost five times higher than for men. Men were able to warn each other as they met in public spaces, but they communicated information to the rest of the family only sporadically. Many women were not allowed to leave their homes without a male relative. They waited, in vain, for their relatives to return home and take them to a safe place.

Women as agents of change

When women participate in decision-making at national and community levels, they can help devise effective climate change solutions that build stronger communities.

- In Kenya, where communities were suffering from lack of natural resources, Wangari Maathai started the Green Belt Movement to plant trees, replenishing resources and reducing vulnerability to climate change. Her movement spread worldwide.
- During a drought in Micronesia, women were able to find a new source of potable water before government officials recognized them as leaders in the answer to the problem.
- Women have been taking an active role in what are traditionally considered “male” talks in responding to disasters, e.g., following Hurricane Mitch in Guatemala and Honduras in 1998. When women were included as equal participants in disaster preparedness plans in the small town of La Masica, Honduras, for example, no one died after Mitch hit the area.
- In a CARE project in Bangladesh, women prioritized climate preparedness strategies that could be implemented close to home such as homestead gardening and duck rearing; in the project, which recruited female field officers, women made up 58 percent of total project participants.
- As part of a joint project between Oxfam America and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, local women administer a surveillance system that helps anticipate needs before droughts hit in Ethiopia.
- One grassroots women’s organization and Oxfam America partner located in the US Gulf Coast, Coastal Women for Change, is creating homegrown solutions to help families, seniors, and low-income people prepare for the next, inevitable storm. The solutions include hurricane preparedness kits, coordination with transit companies to provide buses for evacuations, and advocacy at the local government level for evacuation plans that include low-income neighborhoods.

Oxfam America and WEDO

Oxfam America is an international relief and development organization that creates lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and injustice. The Women’s Environment & Development Organization (WEDO) is an international organization that advocates for women’s equality in global and national policy. Together, we are working to raise awareness about the human impact of climate change. To join our efforts, go to www.oxfamamerica.org/climate or www.wedo.org.

What can you do?

Join Oxfam and WEDO in advocating for US legislation that helps women and their communities build up their resilience to climate change.

- Go to www.oxfamamerica.org/sisters to learn about our grassroots campaign, Sisters on the Planet, which is dedicated to educating Americans about the impacts of climate change on women.
- Sign up to be on the listserv for the Women Demand US Action on Climate Change campaign at WDACCUS@googlegroups.com and become a part of environmental and women’s rights activists around the country pushing for US action on domestic climate change legislation and US re-engagement in international climate change negotiations.

On Santa Monica’s Pier, Oxfam volunteers demonstrate how climate change exacerbates water scarcity issues. In times of drought, women and girls are forced to walk longer distances to collect clean water for household use.



“Let the women go to Washington. Let them tell the stories that are not being told. Their message is simple: we’re still here. We’re going to be here. And climate change affects all of us.”

Sharon Hanshaw, executive director of Coastal Women for Change and one of Oxfam’s Sisters on the Planet



This is a joint publication of Oxfam America and the Women’s Environment & Development Organization. Sources include Oxfam America, WEDO, the Working Group on Climate Change and Development, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

Working together to end poverty and injustice

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