



WOMEN - LED
CLIMATE ACTION

Impact On People, Planet, And Parity

CONTRIBUTING PARTNER ORGANISATIONS



GENDER WORKING GROUP MEMBERS



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This compendium has been a collective journey, and we owe deep gratitude to those who made it possible. Our heartfelt appreciation extends to the members of the **Gender Working Group (GWG)** of the ClimateRISE Alliance: a collective of civil society organizations and allies committed to advancing gender-just climate action. It was their initiative and conviction that women's leadership must not only be recognized but also celebrated and resourced, that first planted the seed for this effort.

Most importantly, we are grateful to all the **civil society organisations (CSOs)** featured here. Their generosity in opening up their work, sharing insights, and reflecting candidly on their journeys has made this compendium possible and infused it with both authenticity and depth.

This collection is dedicated to them and the communities they serve; a testament to the resilience, creativity, and leadership of women who are at the heart of climate action.

FOREWORD

Climate change is not only an environmental crisis; it is rapidly becoming a driver of deepening inequality. It is, therefore, **not a “gender-neutral” phenomenon** as framed by dominant narratives, but in fact responsible for reversing some hard won gains in gender equality. For instance, global estimates suggest that climate impacts could push up to 158 million additional women and girls into poverty by 2050¹, primarily through disruptions to livelihoods, food systems, health, and the care economy.

This disproportionate impact is rooted in **women’s roles within climate-affected systems**. Across rural and urban contexts, women are deeply embedded in sectors that are most sensitive to environmental stress: smallholder agriculture, water and fuel management, informal waste economies, and household care work. These roles situate women at the frontlines of climate disruption, where shifts in rainfall, heat, water availability, and ecological health translate directly into lost income, increased labour, and heightened human health issues. Climate change, therefore, does not introduce new vulnerabilities so much as it intensifies existing ones within systems that women already sustain.

Investment patterns and institutional support are often blind to these realities. For instance, 753 million women in climate-vulnerable countries lack access to basic financial services, limiting their ability to absorb shocks or invest in adaptation². Women-led climate enterprises and organisations receive only a small fraction of global climate investment, and gender-responsive action remains marginal within mainstream climate finance flows³.

Yet evidence from across sectors points to a clear counter-narrative: when women participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making, governance outcomes improve. Research from the OECD shows that women’s leadership in environmental and resource governance is associated with stronger sustainability outcomes, better compliance, and more inclusive decision-making processes⁴.

In practice, women’s climate leadership is most visible not as isolated innovation, but as **institutional work** embedded in everyday systems. Across climate-vulnerable regions, women farmers, waste workers, and community leaders are advancing climate responses through platforms such as self-help groups, producer collectives, water user committees, and local governance forums- institutions that already mediate livelihoods, risk, and social protection. These structures enable women to convert household-level adaptation (changes in cropping, water use, waste practices, or energy choices) into collective norms, shared assets, and negotiated governance outcomes.

1. Women’s World Banking, 2023
2. Women’s World Banking, 2024
3. World Bank, 2025
4. OECD, 2021

Crucially, this form of leadership delivers **simultaneous benefits**: strengthening climate resilience while reinforcing community cohesion, livelihoods, and gender equity. In doing so, women-led initiatives reshape how climate challenges are understood and addressed: situating ecological change within social and economic realities, integrating traditional and local knowledge into everyday problem-solving, and advancing solution pathways that prioritise care, collective well-being, and long-term stewardship alongside environmental outcomes.

It is this recognition of women’s leadership that has shaped Dasra’s own approach over the past twenty-five years. Across its work, Dasra has consistently engaged with women not as recipients of development interventions, but as actors embedded within the systems that govern health, education, livelihoods, and local decision-making. Initiatives such as the **10to19 Adolescents Collaborative** demonstrated the power of coordinated, system-wide action when girls and young women are centred within institutional responses, while **WomenLead India** focused on strengthening women’s leadership and collective voice within civil society and grassroots organisations. As climate change increasingly disrupts the same systems these efforts engage, Dasra’s learning naturally extended into the climate domain. The ClimateRISE Alliance was formed to strengthen climate resilience for marginalized communities through collaboration, with its Gender Working Group ensuring that women’s lived experience, institutional leadership, and collective power remain central to how climate action is understood and advanced.

This compendium is an outcome of that commitment. It brings together evidence from women-led climate initiatives across India, not to present a single model, but to surface recurring patterns of impact: where leadership, collective institutions, and local knowledge converge to produce climate resilience, stronger community systems, and gender-equitable outcomes. It moves beyond the narrative of women as victims to highlight women as **innovators, organizers, knowledge-holders, and decision-makers** shaping resilience against climate change on the ground. For practitioners, funders, and policymakers, these cases offer insight into where investment, policy support, and institutional alignment can most effectively strengthen climate action.

Women across India are shaping climate resilience with creativity, courage, and collective strength. Our responsibility is to recognize, support, and amplify this leadership. We are deeply grateful to the civil society partners and community leaders whose work continues to teach us what resilience looks like in practice. This compendium is our way of honouring their leadership and bringing their stories to a wider audience, and we are proud to bring these stories forward.

- *Neera Nundy | Co-founder and Partner, Dasra*



Photo credit: Kartik Chandra Prusty | Foundation for Ecological Security

INTRODUCTION

WHY THINK OF WOMEN AND CLIMATE ACTION?

Climate change affects everyone, but it does not affect everyone equally. A universal, “gender-neutral” approach to climate action risks overlooking the realities of a big section of the population and can inadvertently reinforce inequities.

Women, particularly from marginalized communities, carry a disproportionate share of climate-related burdens due to social norms, resource responsibilities, and limited decision-making power. They often walk long distances to fetch water when local sources dry up or become contaminated, manage household and subsistence farms affected by erratic rainfall or soil degradation, and care for children, the elderly, and sick family members during heatwaves, floods, or disease outbreaks. In emergencies, such as cyclones or floods, women are frequently the last to eat, access relief, or evacuate, reflecting entrenched inequalities in mobility, safety, and resource access. When extreme weather disasters strike, **women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men**, according to the UN¹. These burdens are not incidental; they are shaped by societal roles, restricted access to land, finance, and services, and systemic gender inequities that climate stress amplifies.

Since women experience and respond to climate impacts differently from men, interventions that ignore these realities risk being incomplete or ineffective. A “one-size-fits-all” approach can inadvertently reinforce inequalities, leaving women (and the communities they support) more vulnerable. Gender-responsive and gender-transformative climate action ensures that adaptation and mitigation strategies are inclusive, locally grounded, and capable of building resilience that benefits everyone.

WHAT IS WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION?

Yet, **the story does not end with vulnerability**. Women are not just passive victims of climate change; they are **leaders of adaptation, stewards of resilience, and catalysts of community action**.

By “women-led climate action,” we refer to initiatives where women meaningfully influence or drive climate-related work: through decision-making, knowledge leadership, collective organising, or on-the-ground implementation, whether independently or in shared roles. It’s not a fixed model, but a continuum of practice shaped by context. It includes both formal leadership, such as participating in village councils, water committees, or self-help groups, and informal leadership, like organizing neighborhood networks, mentoring peers, or coordinating household and community-level adaptation practices.

Women-led climate action can therefore take many forms: women may conserve local seeds and forests, manage water resources, implement clean energy solutions, or develop waste management and livelihood programs that reduce environmental impact. They may also act as educators, sharing knowledge about sustainable practices, or as advocates, influencing local governance and decision-making processes to ensure that climate interventions reflect the needs of their communities.

In essence, women-led climate action encompasses both environmental stewardship and social coordination, drawing on women’s knowledge, skills, and networks to plan and execute strategies that enhance resilience, mitigate climate risks, and support community well-being.



ABOUT THIS COMPENDIUM

Women's contributions in climate-action are under-recognised in research, under-represented in decision-making forums, and drastically underfunded in climate finance flows (just 2% of global climate finance explicitly targets gender equality)².

This compendium, developed by the Gender Working Group (GWG) of the ClimateRISE Alliance, seeks to change that. The ClimateRISE Alliance is a multi-stakeholder platform of over 70 organizations, including civil society groups, research institutions, and policy advocates, working to inform and influence India's climate action, with a focus on centering the voices of marginalized communities. The GWG brings together members of this Alliance who are attempting to ensure that women's knowledge, leadership, and priorities are central to climate solutions. By highlighting women-led initiatives across India, the compendium showcases the strategies, systems, and leadership women bring to climate action, making a case not just for inclusion, but for investment in women as drivers of resilient and equitable communities.

The idea is that while we continue asking how women are affected by climate change, let's also ask what changes when women lead climate action. While a deeper analysis of how women's leadership influences climate resilience, community systems, and gender equity will follow in the section after the case studies, some points for consideration from the case studies are as follows:

1

When women lead climate action, they bring grounded knowledge, social rootedness, and a systems view shaped by their everyday experiences and intergenerational knowledge. In many climate-vulnerable communities, women are closely involved in managing land, water, food, and household resilience. This proximity to climate-impacted systems gives rise to insights that are practical, locally adapted, and often overlooked by top-down programs. Many women draw on intergenerational knowledge through which they have historically had to manage scarce resources for household and community survival- traditional knowledge that is otherwise not available in the ecosystem.

2

What sets many women-led efforts apart is not just what they do, but how they organise. Women often lead through collective structures: self-help groups, savings circles, producer collectives, or informal neighbourhood networks. This is shaped by both constraint and choice: in contexts where women have limited access to formal institutions or decision-making spaces, **collectives offer emotional safety for confidence, visibility, and strength in numbers.** They also foster shared learning and ownership, acting as a sustainable source of social infrastructure in the community.

3

As we wrote this compendium in partnership with different civil society organisations, we also realised that women are often seen by them as **strong and reliable program partners**- because of how gendered realities shape their engagement. In many rural areas, women are less likely to leave behind their familial responsibilities and migrate for work, which means they stay rooted in their communities and sustain long-term engagement. Their roles in managing household finances, social networks, and daily survival often translate into careful resource management and consistent participation. This grounded presence enables continuity in programs, reduces dropout rates, and builds local ownership. It also means that training, funding, and institutional support invested in women is more likely to stay within the community, **creating a deeper and more lasting impact.**

The core message is clear:
Women Are Leading, And Their Leadership Is Effective, Essential, And Deserving Of Greater Recognition And Support.

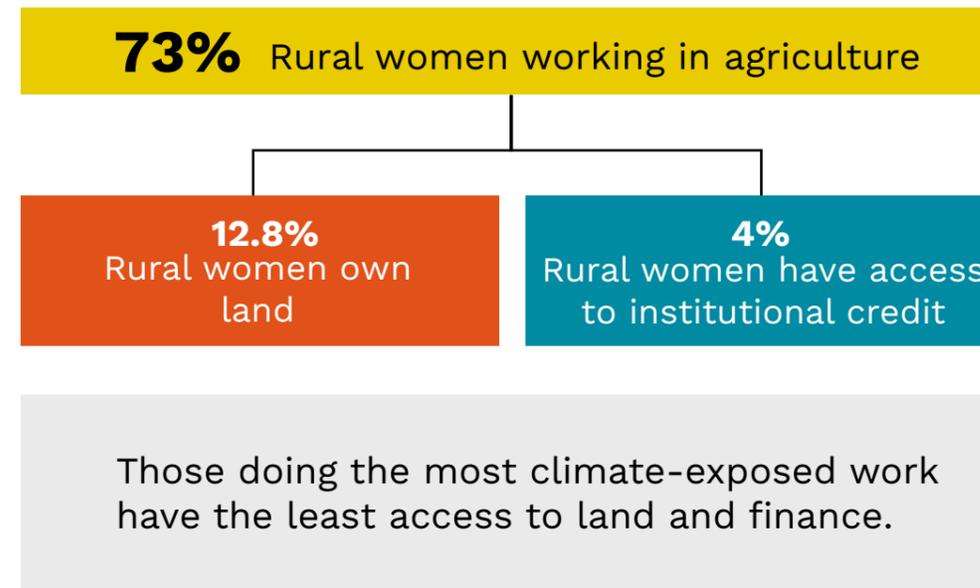
WHO ARE THE WOMEN WE ARE LOOKING AT IN THIS COMPENDIUM?

This compendium focuses on **women climate leaders in India** (with one case covering Nepal as well) - contexts where climate vulnerability is high, but recognition of women's leadership remains limited. The drivers of this compendium recognise that **women are not a monolith**: not globally, and certainly not within any one country or region. Class, caste, ethnicity, religion, location (urban/rural), disability, and assigned gender at birth all shape how climate risks are experienced and navigated. These layers of identity also influence who is able to access leadership roles, resources, or visibility in the climate space.

That said, we also knew that documenting every dimension of this diversity in one compendium was neither feasible nor necessarily strategic. Our approach required some **focus to allow for depth, context, and nuance**. So we chose to start with what we, as a working group of primarily India-based civil society actors, know most intimately: the realities of rural women in India's climate-vulnerable geographies. The case studies presented here are therefore **overwhelmingly Indian, and within that, predominantly rural**.

Specifically, our compendium case studies span across the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Manipur, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, and more, along with central Nepal.

In rural India, approximately 73% of women working outside their homes are engaged in agriculture³. These women form the **backbone of India's food systems**, yet **only 12.8% of them own land**⁴. Moreover, **just 4% of rural women farmers have access to institutional credit**, reflecting deep-rooted barriers to financing⁵. This means that those doing the most climate-exposed work have the least access to the tools, recognition, or autonomy needed to adapt.



Despite the odds, the women are at the front of climate-action across various themes, basis specific climate & social realities. Some of these captured in the compendium include water governance & scarcity, coastal & terrestrial erosion and hazards, agricultural decline & unsustainable practices, climate-induced migration, waste management, lack of reliable energy, and climate-induced gender-based violence.

3. The Indian Express, 2025
4. The Business Standard, 2019
5. The Print, 2021



STRUCTURE OF THE COMPENDIUM

This compendium is divided as follows:

Recurring Contexts: Shared Patterns Across Local Realities:

This section identifies common climate and social challenges across the regions represented in the compendium. It highlights recurring issues such as water scarcity, agricultural stress, climate-induced migration, and energy access, while situating them within local realities. By mapping these patterns, readers can understand the systemic pressures shaping women's leadership and the practical contexts in which initiatives emerge.



Case Studies:

The core of the compendium, the case studies provide detailed accounts of women-led climate initiatives across India (and one from Nepal). Each case illustrates how women mobilize knowledge, networks, and resources to address climate challenges. From formal leadership in governance structures to informal community organizing, the cases showcase diverse strategies, highlighting the impact at the layers of climate, community, and gender-equality.

Lessons from the Ground: What Works in Enabling Women-Led Climate Action:

This section highlights practical lessons directly shared by CSOs implementing women-led climate initiatives. Themes such as the role of collectives, grounding action in local realities, combining technical skills with leadership development, addressing social and market barriers, and linking women to governance and institutions are elaborated on.



Synthesizing the Evidence: Insights on Impact & Scaling of Women-Led Climate Action:

This section presents a collective analysis of the multilayered impacts observed across the case studies. It also identifies enabling conditions for scaling, including sustained funding, supportive policies, and strengthened CSO capacity, offering guidance for stakeholders seeking to replicate, expand, and institutionalize women-centered climate action.

Conclusion:

This section frames key takeaways for readers, showing how these insights can inform the design, support, and scaling of initiatives that center women as agents of resilient, equitable, and context-responsive climate solutions. It builds on the previous chapter to identify key leverage points that different stakeholders can immediately take action on, and outlines the need for continued evidence building in the gender-climate intersection.



NOTE TO THE READER

As readers engage with the case studies in this compendium, we invite them to look beyond outcomes alone, and instead pay close attention to the **forms of leadership, systems of support, and processes of change** that underpin them. Each case reflects a different stage and mode of integrating gender and climate lenses, offering insight not just into what is being done, but how, by whom, and under what conditions. These cases are not presented as best practices, but as **situated practices**, rooted in specific geographies, shaped by intersecting social realities, and constantly evolving. We hope this collection serves as a **mirror for reflection**, a **source of learning**, and a **springboard for deeper engagement**; whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, researcher, or funder seeking to centre gender justice in climate action. Most importantly, we hope it helps reframe women not as beneficiaries, but as architects of resilient, community-led climate solutions.



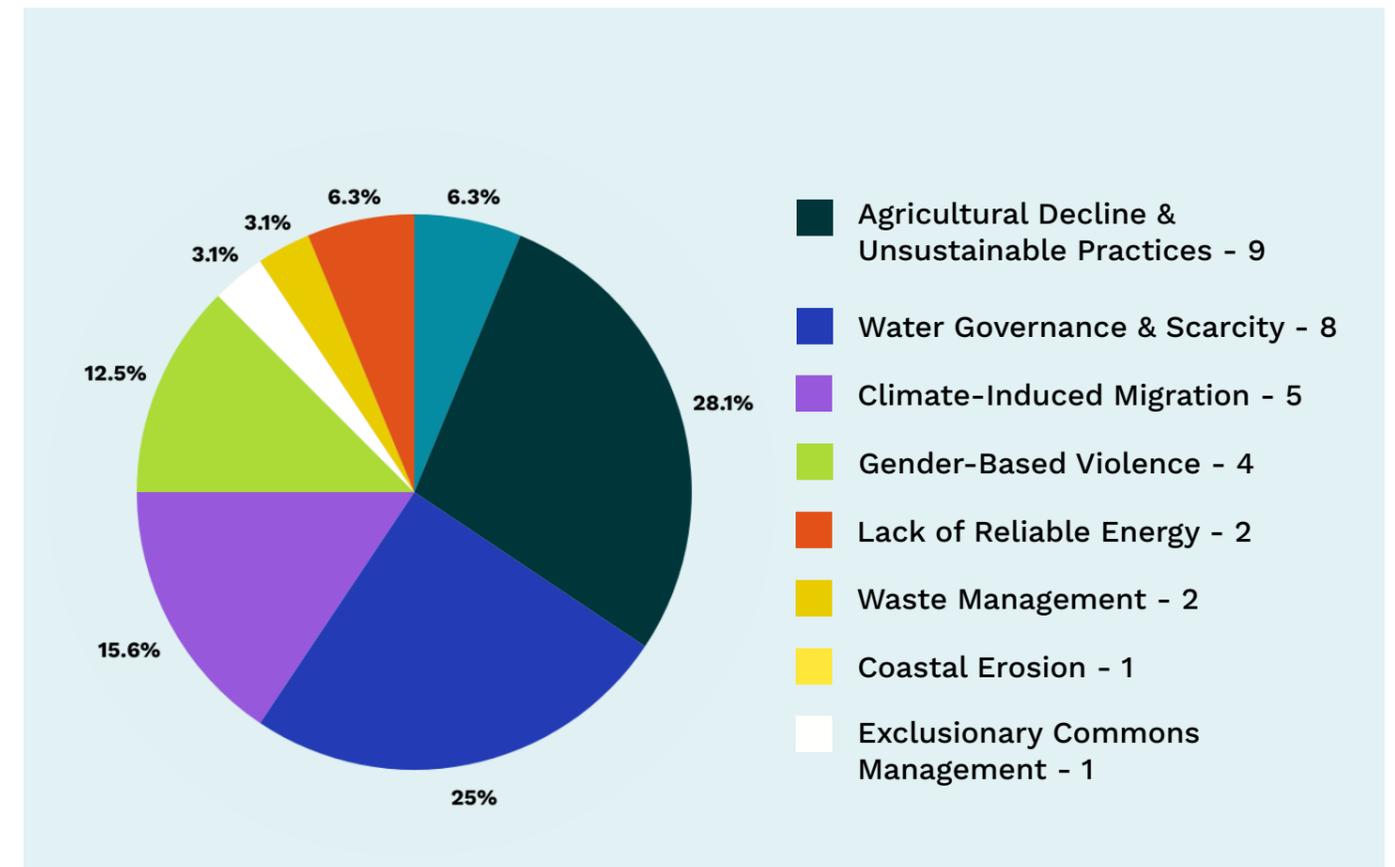
Recurring Contexts

Shared Patterns Across Local Realities

Each case study in this compendium is rooted in a specific local climate and social reality. These realities are shaped by geography, culture, and community dynamics, and while each has its own distinctive features, many of the challenges and experiences resonate across regions. In other words, what appears highly localized in one setting often reflects broader, recurring patterns visible in other contexts as well.

To make sense of these commonalities, we have developed a set of context themes: high-level groupings that capture the recurring experiences lived by communities and women leaders across diverse geographies. These archetypes are not meant to erase local nuance but rather to highlight patterns that cut across contexts, enabling readers to see the bigger picture of climate-social issues and opportunities.

Each case study in this compendium is tagged to one or more of these archetypes. This allows readers to quickly situate the story within a broader frame of shared realities and to understand how individual experiences contribute to larger patterns of resilience, leadership, and climate action.



WATER GOVERNANCE & SCARCITY

Water scarcity in India is shaped by both environmental constraints and systemic governance gaps. In regions like Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, limited irrigation, insufficient storage and distribution infrastructure (including drying up and disuse of traditional storage tanks), and declining groundwater make reliable water access a challenge for households and communities. Coastal and delta areas, such as the Sundarbans and Jambusar, face salinity intrusion and deteriorating freshwater quality, while many hilly regions and forest-edge areas rely on unregulated water sources. Deforestation, rising temperatures, and erratic rainfall have caused community-managed lakes to dry and local fisheries to collapse in villages like Shankarpur in Maharashtra, further limiting water availability and household nutrition. These challenges highlight that water scarcity is as much about inequitable access and infrastructure as it is about climate variability.

The social burden of water scarcity is highly gendered. Women and adolescent girls shoulder most of the responsibility for fetching, storing, and managing water, often walking long distances daily. In households without in-home water sources, as many as 94.8% report that women fetch water (versus 70% for men), underscoring the enormous gender burden.¹ A National Sample Survey report estimates that women and girls in rural India walk an average of 5 km per day per woman to collect water, which amounts to approximately 173 km annually, costing them around 210 hours a year, nearly 27 days of labor lost individually.² This gendered burden has high macroeconomic costs as well. One estimate suggests that Indian women collectively spend 15 crore workdays every year fetching water.³ This unpaid labor represents a significant opportunity cost to the economy, translating to an economic loss of around ₹100 crores annually; time that could otherwise be invested in education, paid work, or community development. The health impacts are also acute, as water carrying women suffer from anemia, fatigue, dehydration, and posture-related ailments.

These personal and economic burdens are compounded by the way water has historically been governed. For decades, water management systems have been shaped primarily by technical and top-down approaches, often sidelining women's experiences and community knowledge. This exclusion has reinforced inequities, leaving women to bear the heaviest responsibilities without having a voice in decision-making. As scarcity continues to intersect with social inequities, women remain frontline responders to water stress, making their inclusion in governance, planning, and representation not just desirable but essential for sustainable solutions.

1. NCAER, 2023

2. Drinking Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Housing Condition in India: NSS 76th Round

3. NDTV, 2022

COASTAL AND TERRESTRIAL EROSION & HAZARDS

India's coasts are undergoing rapid transformation, shaped by both ecological shifts and policy choices. National shoreline monitoring shows that 33.6% of the country's coastline is eroding, 26.9% is accreting, and 39.6% remains stable.⁴ For coastal states like Tamil Nadu and Odisha, this translates into direct threats to land, livelihoods, and identity. For small-scale fishing communities, these shifts are not just environmental disruptions but existential threats, stripping away their beach landing sites, gear storage areas, and the very spaces from which they access the sea. In Odisha, for instance, between 1990 and 2018, nearly 141 km (or about 25.6% of its 549.5 km shoreline) was lost to erosion, displacing households and forcing some fishing settlements to fragment or relocate.⁵ 42% of Odisha's fishing villages are socio-economically highly vulnerable, and more than 70% face high cumulative vulnerability when environmental and social risks are combined,⁶ meaning that existing vulnerabilities are pushing coastal populations further into cycles of precarity as ecological change and human pressures converge to deepen inequities.

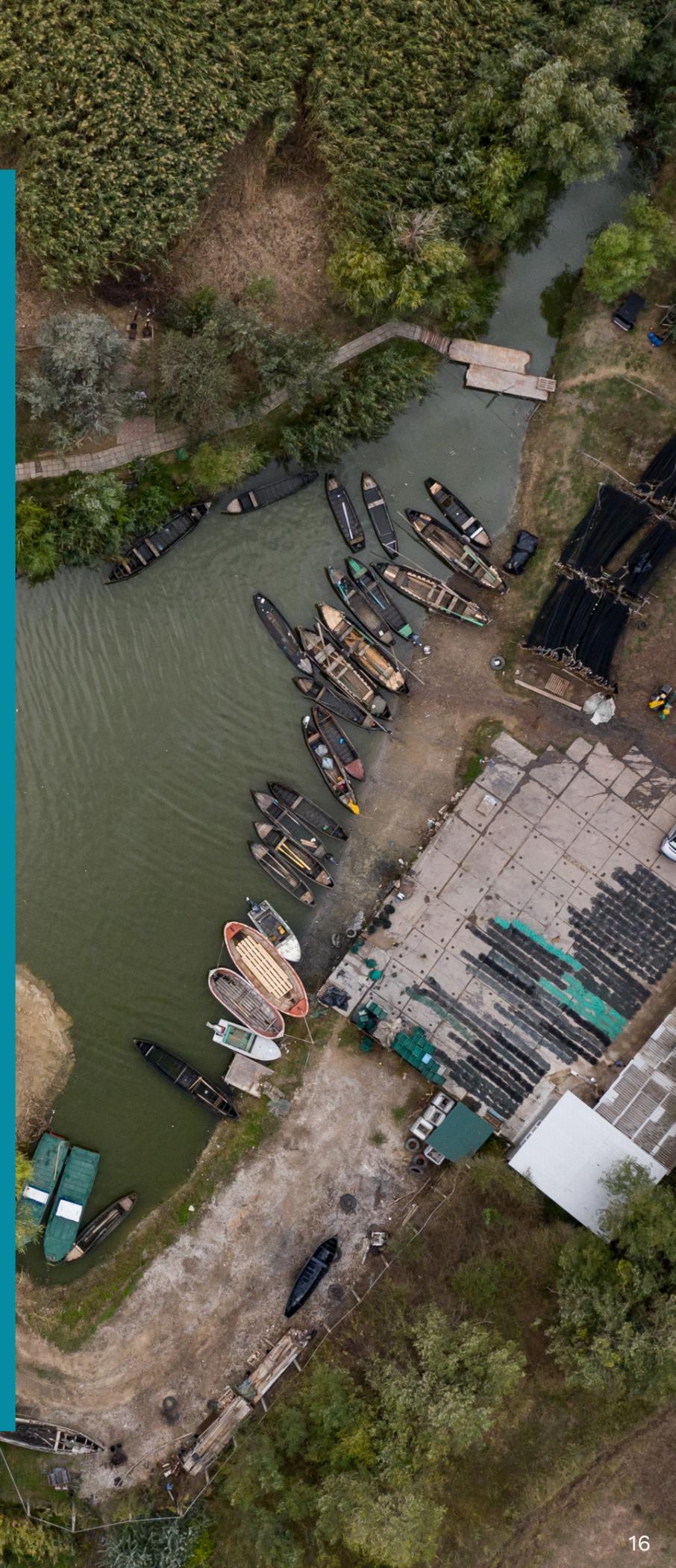
The same underlying drivers of climate variability and unplanned development are reshaping terrestrial ecosystems in the Himalayas. Uttarakhand alone has recorded 12,319 landslide incidents between 1988 and 2023, reflecting a sharp increase in frequency. Research along the Char Dham highway corridor found 811 landslides on an 800 km stretch, with over 80% occurring within 100 meters of the road, pointing to the role of unscientific hill-cutting and infrastructure expansion in amplifying natural instability. Climate dynamics compound these risks: 73% of landslides in the Indian Himalayas are triggered by heavy rainfall, a hazard that is intensifying as monsoons grow more erratic and snowmelt patterns shift. The human costs are immense as each of these events does more than alter landscapes; they sever communities from healthcare, education, and markets at their most critical moments, deepening isolation.

For women, these hazards carry particular weight. In coastal belts, as fishing and agricultural livelihoods decline, women often take on additional informal work while maintaining their caregiving roles. In the mountains, they face heightened risks during evacuations and disasters due to limited mobility, while also being tasked with securing food, water, and family safety. The exclusion of their perspectives from planning perpetuates inequitable responses, even though it is evident that their leadership is vital for building resilience.

4. MoEFCC, National Shoreline Change Atlas, 2016

5. National Centre for Coastal Research, 2018

6. ICAR-Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute, 2019



AGRICULTURAL DECLINE & UNSUSTAINABLE PRACTICES



Agricultural decline in India is increasingly driven by unsustainable land use, fragmented ecosystems, and intensifying climate stress. Across tribal and forested regions of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, unpredictable rainfall, rising temperatures, and soil degradation, exacerbated by chemical-reliant farming, have led to widening yield gaps. For instance, Madhya Pradesh's rainfed yield gap for maize is around 105% (actual yields are less than half of potential), and for groundnut as high as 231%.⁷

Salinity compounds these challenges in regions like Jambusar, Gujarat, where farmland is rendered increasingly uncultivable. India's salt-afflicted land spans around 6.73 million hectares, of which Gujarat accounts for 2.23 million hectares. This salinity results in huge agricultural losses: Gujarat alone loses up to ₹10,063 crore worth of production annually due to salt-affected soils.⁸

Meanwhile, in the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot, declining forest cover and pollinator populations are undermining agricultural resilience. Estimates show that the population of honeybees in India has dropped by more than 40%, particularly in places like the Nilgiris, where changes in land use have shrunk habitat and floral resources.⁹ Broader research reveals a 61% average decline in tropical crop pollinators globally, including major staples and cash crops like coffee, mango, and watermelon¹⁰. Pollinator decline threatens food security and productivity; every third bite globally depends on these insect networks.¹¹

In Manipur's mountainous tribal areas, deforestation, insecure land tenure, and unsustainable land use are straining traditional farming systems. Locals increasingly overexploit fragile lands just to survive, a trend mirrored across India's uplands but notably acute in indigenous landscapes where land rights remain contested and institutional support weak.

Alternative agricultural potentials like bamboo also suffer from systemic neglect. India is the second-largest bamboo producer globally, with nearly 14.6 million tonnes harvested in 2019, yet paradoxically remains one of the largest importers, sourcing 88% of raw materials in 2021 due to low productivity and weak supply chains.¹²

Women in smallholder, tribal, and landless communities bear the brunt of these compounded shocks and neglect. Across India, women now make up over 42% of the agricultural workforce, yet they account for just 12.8% of land ownership and often earn lower wages or receive no pay for cultivating family land.¹³ Moreover in a country where a quarter of the landmass, over 205 million acres, comprises Commons such as forests, grasslands, and water bodies, more than 350 million rural people, including some of the poorest, rely on these shared natural resources for their daily livelihoods and well-being.¹⁴ Among them, women are often the primary users and managers of Commons, and they therefore face the greatest burdens: walking farther for water, managing livestock amid fodder shortages, and absorbing household-level food insecurity, while remaining excluded from formal governance and decision-making processes.

It is clear that women are not just victims of unsustainable agricultural practices but also indispensable agents of resilience. Their experiential knowledge of crops, forests, and water systems positions them uniquely to lead adaptive strategies, yet institutional frameworks continue to overlook them. Recognizing and integrating women's expertise into land, agriculture, and commons governance is not only a matter of equity—it is essential for securing the future of India's food systems and rural livelihoods under accelerating climate stress.

7. Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy, Climate Change and Agriculture, 2017

8. Times of India, 2021

9. The Bastion, 2022

10. Down to Earth, 2023

11. BBC News, 2010

12. National Economic Forum, 2023

13. The News Minute, 2018, Land Portal, 2020

14. Foundation for Ecological Security, 2022

CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION

India ranks as the fourth worst-affected country globally in terms of climate change-induced migration, with over 3 million people forced to abandon their residences in the year 2020-2021.¹⁵ Climate-induced migration in India, however, is highly gendered. Men often migrate in response to environmental stress because they have greater mobility and social permission to seek work elsewhere. Women, in contrast, are typically unable to migrate due to household responsibilities, caregiving duties, and social restrictions. Between 2001 and 2011, 7.7 million farmers left agriculture, most of them men, contributing to “feminisation” of agriculture, where women take on an increasing share of farm labor while often remaining landless.¹⁶ According to Census 2011, nearly 98 million Indian women are employed in agriculture, but 63% are agricultural laborers dependent on others’ land, and women account for 80% of farm work despite owning only 13% of land.¹⁷

These patterns of displacement disrupt family and community structures. Seasonal or temporary migration caused by failing livelihoods leaves women to manage households, farms, and informal income sources in the absence of men, often under conditions of social isolation and resource scarcity. Children’s education, access to services, and overall household stability are affected, amplifying the burdens women bear. According to the UN, female-headed households in rural areas lose about 8% more income to heat stress and around 3% more to floods compared to male-headed households, translating to an extra \$53 billion lost annually. The study indicates that a 1°C temperature increase results in a one-third higher income reduction for female-headed households than for male-headed ones, owing to factors like less access to land, credit, and technology, face restricted mobility, women being concentrated in low-paying and informal work, and bearing disproportionate household and caregiving responsibilities that limit their adaptive capacity.¹⁸

When women do migrate, they face heightened risks of gender-based violence, exploitation, and economic insecurity, making migration a far more dangerous and constrained option for them. For instance, in the aftermath of Cyclone Aila in 2009, while many men from the Indian Sundarbans migrated to other parts of the country to seek work, women, with even more limited livelihood options due to gendered disadvantages, and a heightened vulnerability, were forced to migrate to Kolkata’s red-light district. After the cyclone, the number of women entering the district rose by 20–25%, with many identifying as environmental refugees, and lacking basic necessities and safe housing, they became even more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and health risks.¹⁹

15. UN Women, 2023

16. The Hindu, 2013

17. Oxfam, 2013

18. The Guardian, 2024

19. Economic & Political Weekly, 2020



WASTE MANAGEMENT

Waste emissions are a significant contributor to India's climate crisis, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. In cities like Pune, approximately 74% of municipal solid waste is organic, yet much of it is dumped or transported to overloaded landfills instead of being composted at source, leading to substantial methane emissions—the second most potent greenhouse gas.²⁰

In forest-fringe and tourism-dependent areas, such as the Corbett Tiger Reserve, rising visitor numbers, rural consumerism, and urban spillover have led to unmanaged waste accumulating in sensitive ecosystems. Studies by Waste Warriors revealed that areas around Corbett generate 2–5 kg of plastic waste per day per 100 visitors, much of it leaking into adjacent forests due to weak waste management systems.²¹ Plastic debris clogs riverbeds, blocks irrigation canals, and pollutes soil, exacerbating environmental degradation and disrupting local livelihoods.

Women carry much of the responsibility for managing this mounting waste, both as household managers and as waste pickers. In Pune, nearly 90% of waste pickers are women, predominantly from Scheduled Castes, who often work under unsafe conditions and earn low wages.²² Women waste pickers, despite their expertise in segregation, resource recovery, and public hygiene, are marginalized, underpaid, and excluded from formal decision-making. In households, women handle both domestic waste and the environmental impacts of unmanaged trash, including burning plastics or collecting debris from agricultural lands. Social stigma and systemic exclusion make their labor invisible, even as they contend with the health, economic, and ecological consequences of mounting waste.



20. Ocean Plastic: The Circulate Initiative
21. Hindustan Times, 2025
22. The News Minute, 2017

LACK OF RELIABLE ENERGY

Across rural India, from Rajasthan's deserts to Assam's hills, communities face chronic energy insecurity. Approximately 89% of rural households depend on polluting energy sources such as firewood, chips, and dung cake for cooking, while only about 56% of total households have access to electricity.²³

Traditional cooking methods expose women to indoor air pollution, with studies indicating that exposure to biomass fuel smoke is significantly associated with symptoms such as headache, dry cough, and hypertension.²⁴ More than two-thirds of women using biomass fuel for cooking reported health symptoms, including ophthalmic, dermatological, and cardiovascular issues.²⁵

The lack of electricity limits work, education, and access to digital tools or energy-dependent agricultural technologies. Women bear the brunt of these compounded challenges. Responsible for managing household energy, cooking, and small-scale farming tasks, they expend additional time and effort when fuels are scarce or unreliable. Energy insecurity prevents women from fully utilizing or participating in developing climate-smart agricultural technologies, such as solar-powered lift irrigation systems, mechanized processing units, or energy-efficient appliances that could reduce drudgery and enhance productivity. Limited access to designing these tools, coupled with gaps in rural development programs that treat energy, enterprise, and climate adaptation in silos, restricts women's capacity to participate in economic life or decision-making, even as their lived experience equips them with deep knowledge of local energy and resource needs.

23. The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), 2010
24. PubMed Central, 2018
25. PLOS, 2020

CLIMATE-INDUCED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Domestic violence often rises in the wake of climate stress because economic hardship and resource scarcity exacerbate unhealthy household power dynamics. A study analyzing data from 194,871 women across India, Pakistan, and Nepal found that a 1°C increase in ambient temperature correlates with an 8% rise in physical violence and a 7.3% increase in sexual violence.²⁶

In regions like the Sundarbans and drought-prone Karnataka, failed crops, flooding, and water scarcity create tension within families. Men, facing stress from lost income or livelihoods, may exert control or aggression toward women at home, turning pre-existing inequalities into heightened risk. Women's caregiving responsibilities and limited bargaining power within households make them especially exposed during these periods of stress.

Beyond the household, climate-driven disruptions create additional threats. Seasonal or forced migration breaks down traditional support networks, leaving women and girls vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, or coercion. Women heading their households (as men migrate in the face of climate induced livelihood loss) face heightened social scrutiny, stigma, and attempts at exploitation, given prevailing social norms of male authority and the expectation that men are the primary providers and decision-makers in families. These intersecting pressures—household tension, unsafe mobility, and community-level vulnerability—show how climate change interacts with entrenched gender norms to increase women's exposure to multiple forms of violence.

EXCLUSIONARY COMMONS MANAGEMENT

In India, the governance of commons, such as forests, grazing lands, and water bodies—often reflects deep-seated gender and social inequalities. While these resources are vital for rural livelihoods, especially for women who are primary users and managers, governance structures frequently marginalize female participation.²⁷ Patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and class divisions often dictate access and control, sidelining women's voices and reinforcing their subordinate roles in decision-making processes. This exclusion not only undermines women's rights but also hampers sustainable management, as their traditional knowledge and practices remain unrecognized and undervalued.²⁸

Research indicates that even when women are present in governance bodies, their influence is often limited. For instance, in community forestry initiatives, women's participation may be tokenistic, with decision-making power still predominantly held by men.²⁹ Such dynamics perpetuate gendered dispossession, where women bear the brunt of resource degradation and policy failures without having a say in governance affecting their daily lives.

26. The Guardian, 2023

27. Science Direct, 2001

28. IQAS, 2020

29. Ecology, Economy and Society—the INSEE Journal, 2021



CASE STUDIES

The Seed Keepers

Women Farmers Reviving Traditional Knowledge And Local Control

Program in Focus: Seed Sovereignty Program

Inception: 2013

Geography: Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh

Reach: 4,000-5,000 households with community seed banks, 70+ indigenous seed varieties revived

Implementing Organisation: VAAGDHARA

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices, Climate-Induced Migration



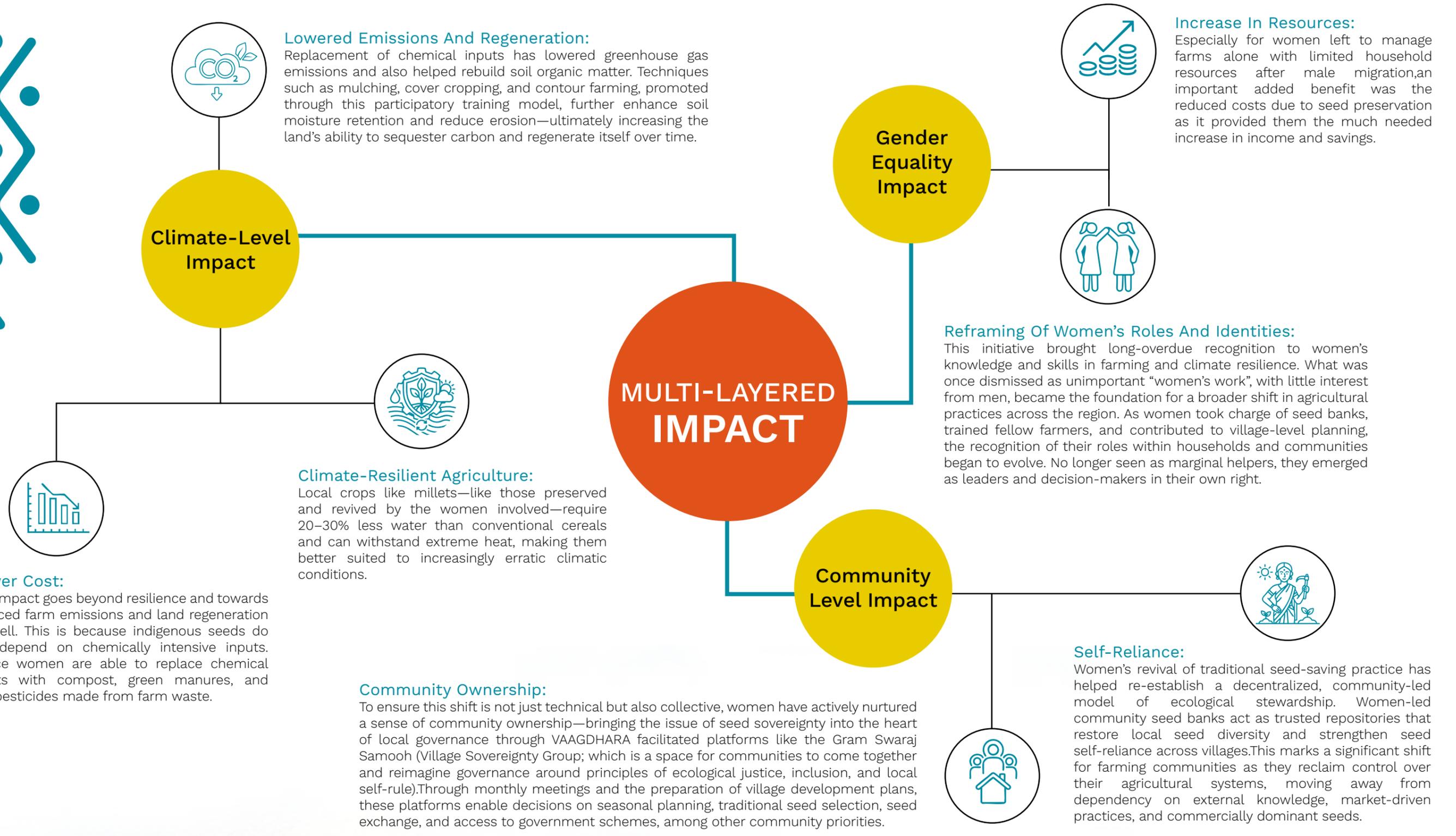
WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Women inherit generations of agroecological wisdom—knowing how to preserve traditional seeds uniquely suited to local climates, more resilient to drought and poor soils, and less reliant on chemical. As the climate shifts, this diversity is a vital source of resilience, offering lower risk, cost, and stronger nutrition.

VAAGDHARA's Seed Sovereignty Program builds on these strengths by centering women's leadership in shaping farming futures—creating platforms to deepen knowledge of sustainable cultivation, governance, and enterprise, and training women farmers who then lead Farmer Field Schools that blend tradition with best practice in seed selection, preservation, and storage.

Besides sharing their knowledge with the larger community, women also set up community-managed seed banks that conserve and circulate over 70 indigenous seed varieties—including millets like Kodo, Kutki, Ragi, Kuri, Batti; maize types such as Paheta, Sathi, Gangdi, and Safed Saathi Makai; pulses like Tuar and Bailadiya Urad; and oilseeds like Til (sesame). These banks reduce dependency on expensive hybrid seeds and protect crops that are naturally suited to the region's soils and climate. Seed Fairs (Beej Utsavs) organised by VAAGDHARA with support of these women, bring together thousands of farmers to exchange seeds and knowledge—reviving near-extinct crops like Black Kang maize, Bailadiya Urad, and Brown Gourd. The program also supports women in digitally documenting seed varieties and traits—creating a growing community archive to protect and share indigenous knowledge for future generations.





LILA DEVI'S JOURNEY: From Learner To Leader In Sustainable Farming

Lila Devi, a farmer holding traditional seed preservation knowledge, and being a member of VAAGDHARA, organised a women's collective called Saksham Samooh, where she consolidated her knowledge on organic farming and women's rights, and decided to lead by example. Despite initial resistance, she convinced her family to dedicate land for indigenous seeds and natural farming. Though the first yield was low (a common occurrence when first switching to natural farming), the quality and taste were unmatched, leading her to expand her work from 1 bigha to 3 bighas of family farmland using only local seeds, preserved from her own crops. Her success inspired over 140 women farmers across five villages, proving that women-led agriculture can drive lasting change.



WAY FORWARD

While women have successfully transformed agricultural practices at the local level, challenges remain—indigenous seeds and crops continue to struggle for space in mainstream markets. VAAGDHARA is addressing this by supporting local marketing, ensuring fair pricing, and embedding women as community educators to sustain and scale the impact. Going forward, it aims to expand the Seed Sovereignty Program to reach 100,000 tribal families across Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat. This includes growing women-led community seed banks, strengthening digital platforms for seed exchange and knowledge-sharing, and embedding the program within climate and agriculture policy frameworks to center tribal communities and women farmers in building sustainable, locally rooted farming futures.

The Solar Spearheaders

Women-Leading Renewable Energy Transition

Program in Focus: Women Prosper Initiative

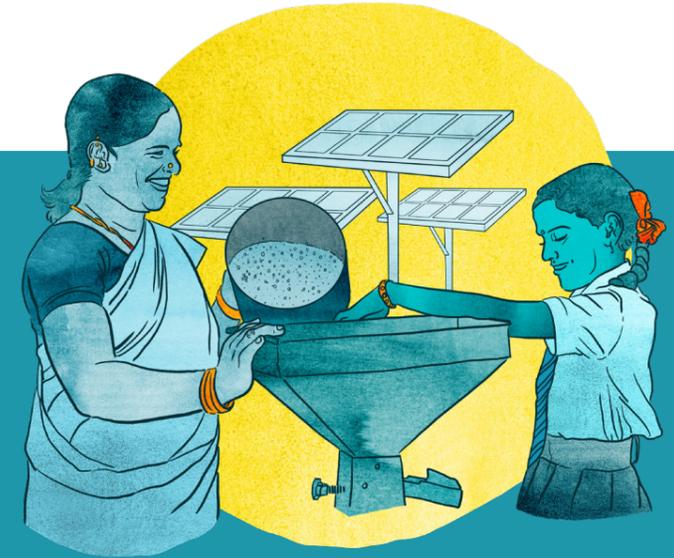
Inception: 2021

Geography: 18 States across India

Reach: 700+ women trained as Solar Sakhis

Implementing Organisation: EMPBindi International Association

Context Theme(s): Lack of Reliable Energy



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

In many Indian villages, electricity is irregular, kerosene is costly, and firewood collection takes hours of women's time each day. These energy struggles are compounded by hotter summers, erratic rainfall, and declining farm yields. Women, who manage household fuel, water, and farm work, experience these burdens firsthand. Rather than waiting for external solutions, they began taking the lead: assembling, repairing, and distributing clean energy products within their communities.

The Women Prosper Initiative (WPI) formalized this movement, training women as Solar Sakhis: grassroots technicians and entrepreneurs. Training was hands-on, with women learning to assemble, install, and troubleshoot lanterns, torches, and charge controllers. For those with limited literacy, color-coded, pictorial manuals made learning accessible. Service and repair centers were established locally, and SHGs helped identify women trusted by their neighbors. Families were involved early to ensure acceptance, as many women stepped into roles outside traditional gender norms.

This hub-and-spoke model created a decentralized energy ecosystem: trained solar engineers maintain core infrastructure, while Solar Sakhis power livelihoods and agriculture. As communities gain reliable electricity and local service support, clean energy becomes a trusted part of daily life.

WPI also opened pathways for women to rise into leadership roles, sparking a profound psychological shift in communities. Women who gain “power to control power” become visible role models, inspiring daughters, nieces, and neighbors. Rising demand for locally tailored solutions led to the creation of labs with 3D printers and battery assembly units, where women receive advanced technical training, innovate, and strengthen their earning capacity. Many also mentor new entrants, manage finances, and lead customer relations:

skills that expand their influence in public life.

What emerged is a women-led energy movement. Solar Sakhis are now recognized not only as providers of reliable power, but as innovators shaping India's clean energy future and carving a space for women in leadership and technology.

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Climate-Level Impact

Reduction In Emissions And Pollution:

Before solar adoption, households relied heavily on kerosene lamps for light and diesel pumps for small farm needs. This not only led to recurring expenses of ₹300–₹500 per month but also caused thick smoke inside homes, affecting women and children most. By shifting to solar lanterns and torches, families immediately reduced fuel costs, eliminated indoor smoke, and contributed to lowering carbon emissions at the village scale.

Sustainable Rural Energy Infrastructure:

Unlike one-time product distributions, the WPI model ensured durability by training women to repair and maintain solar devices locally. For example, when batteries or circuits failed, households no longer had to wait weeks for an outside technician or abandon products as scrap. Instead, Solar Sakhis fixed issues within days, keeping systems operational. This technical self-reliance reduced electronic waste and kept solar energy a dependable part of community life.

Community Level Impact

Community Ownership:

The program was grounded in village committees and local training hubs. This meant that solar transitions were not “handed down” but collectively negotiated. Families and community elders, once skeptical, began supporting women entrepreneurs when they saw transparent bookkeeping of sales, reinvestment of small profits into SHG savings, and collective decision-making on pricing. Over time, solar adoption became a shared village project rather than an individual risk—turning technology into community property, stewarded by women.

Decentralisation:

By setting up decentralized training and service centers within villages, WPI ensured that women could participate without needing to travel far distances, and households could access repair services locally. Seasonal sales efforts—such as mobile solar trucks during harvest festivals—turned clean energy into a visible, collective experience for the whole community. This not only widened reach across multiple villages but also embedded solar adoption into local cultural and economic rhythms.

Gender Equality Impact

Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

Women who were once seen only as household laborers began carrying toolkits, traveling for training, and speaking at village meetings about energy solutions. The act of climbing rooftops to install solar panels, or demonstrating battery packs in markets, disrupted stereotypes of “appropriate” work for women. These visible acts expanded how communities imagined women's capabilities. Many women reported that younger girls in their households started aspiring to roles in technology and entrepreneurship after watching them work.

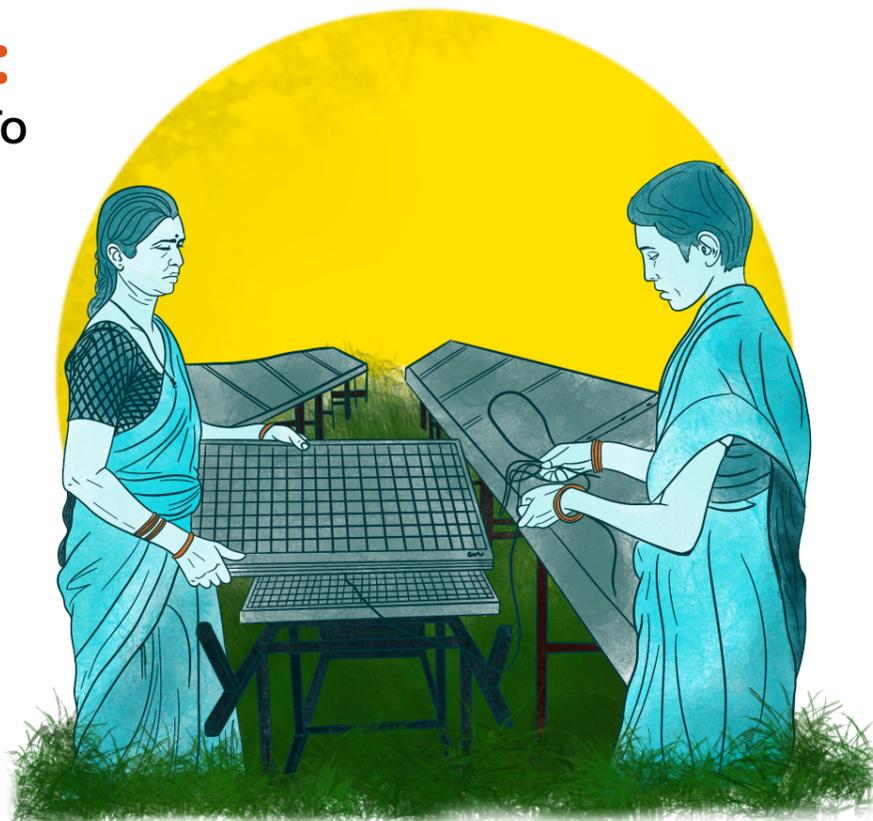
Increase In Resources:

By earning through solar product sales and services, women gained independent income streams. They used earnings to buy school supplies, contribute to household savings, or invest in livestock. For many, this was the first time they controlled money directly. It reduced dependence on moneylenders, who often charged exploitative interest, and strengthened women's voices in family decisions about spending, farming, and even children's education.



THAVRI DEVI: From Homemaker To Changemaker

Once a quiet homemaker, Thavri Devi's life transformed when she joined Bindi's Women Prosper Initiative. With no prior technical experience, she mastered assembling, repairing, and maintaining solar systems—work traditionally dominated by men. Today, she maintains clean energy systems across villages, raises community issues in her panchayat, and inspires other women to step forward. Her efforts have brought reliable electricity to hundreds of homes, enabling children to study after dark and women to start small enterprises. Recognized nationally, she received the President's Award for rural innovation and empowerment. Thavri Devi's journey shows how knowledge and confidence can transform not only a woman's life but the future of her community, making her a symbol of resilience and women-led innovation.



WAY FORWARD

The Women Prosper Initiative is moving into a new phase of deepening women's role in India's clean energy economy. The focus ahead is on scaling advanced training—such as battery assembly and rural fabrication—so that women are not only distributors but producers of clean technology. Strengthening rural manufacturing ecosystems will create steady, local incomes and reduce dependency on external suppliers. At the same time, Bindi International is forging alliances with government programs, rural livelihood missions, and private sector actors to embed this women-led model into larger policy and market systems. The goal is clear: to ensure that women remain at the forefront of powering homes, livelihoods, and climate resilience across rural India.

Rooted Resilience

Women Growing India's Bamboo Economy



Program in Focus: Bamboo-based regenerative agroforestry and livelihoods program

Inception: 2020

Geography: Karnataka, Maharashtra

Reach: 30,000+ women farmers trained, active partnerships with NRLM across 5+ states

Implementing Organisation: Industree Foundation

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practice

WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

India, despite being the world's second-largest bamboo producer, remains a major importer because of the lack of plantations of commercially suitable species: most bamboo resources are forest-based, and the limited supply outside forests is highly fragmented. This, combined with weak supply chains and lack of certification, undercuts bamboo's climate potential and excludes rural and tribal women (key forest stewards) from related economic opportunities.

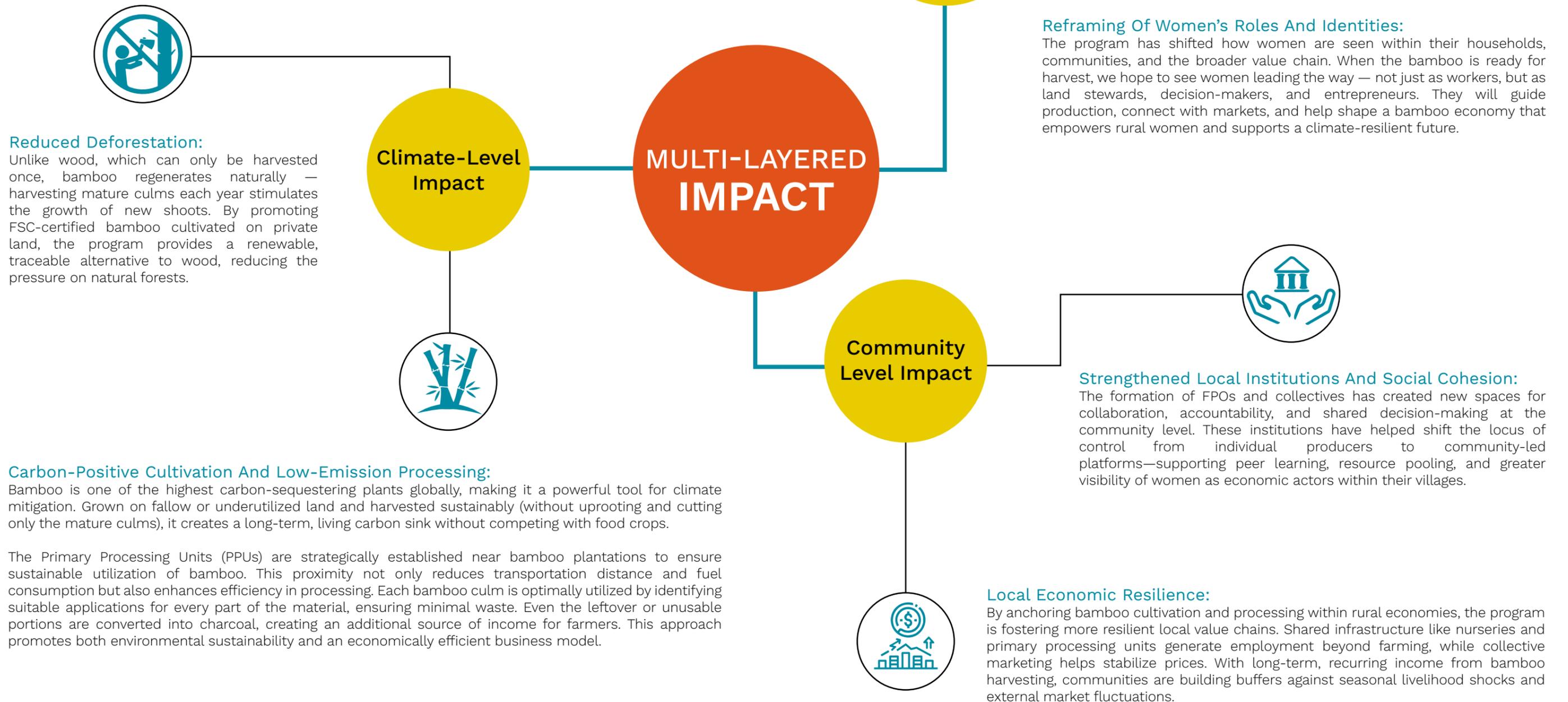
The push to explore bamboo as a nature-based solution began in 2020, with women from tribal and rural communities in Karnataka: particularly in Chikmagalur, Shivamogga, and Hassan districts, leading experiments with this climate-resilient crop with support from Industree Foundation. These women identified unused/uncultivated/unproductive and rain-dependent plots on their family holdings and started cultivating bamboo, allocating up to 1/3 acre per woman. Each woman planted 60 saplings (commercially viable species) of indigenous, non-invasive bamboo species, chosen for ecological suitability and local conditions.

Through collective action, these women formed Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) and began building the foundations of a regenerative bamboo value chain. They grew bamboo, as per FSC-certified standards, from seed, and will harvest it sustainably, and will be supplied to the primary processing units (PPUs) that meet stringent industry quality and certification standards. Their efforts led to India's first FSC-certified bamboo acreage on private land, supported by a digital platform FSC helped design, which streamlined certification processes and input tracking at scale.

Success in Karnataka sparked wider mobilization. In 2023, women farmers in Maharashtra

scaled this model through the REAL (Regenerative Agroforestry and Livelihoods) project. Today, over 30,000 women across multiple states cultivate bamboo as part of an expanding effort to build resilient, climate-positive livelihoods, without replacing existing income sources. By year five, each woman is projected to earn ₹80k to 1 lakh annually from bamboo alone.

Crucially, women are not just participants; they are decision-makers and co-owners of the value chain. Their collectives manage production infrastructure, advocate for quality standards, and navigate market linkages. Alongside cultivating bamboo, they've invested in financial literacy, technical training, and peer leadership, ensuring that both knowledge and economic gains remain within their communities.



DEVIKABAI JAGGANATH: Cultivating Security With Bamboo

Devikabai Jagganath Saharash, a smallholder farmer from Peint block in Nashik, has years of experience cultivating various crops and has always relied on her farming knowledge to sustain her family despite owning very little land. However, repeated crop failures caused by water scarcity and the lack of reliable irrigation made traditional farming increasingly difficult for her. When she learned about the bamboo plantation from the Community Resource Person's (CRP), she saw it as an opportunity to shift to a crop that could thrive with minimal resources. She prepared her fallow/ unused land and began cultivating bamboo, drawn to its resilience and the fact that it requires very little water, only about two litres per week, even during high temperatures, and demands far less attention compared to other crops. As the bamboo grows steadily on her fallow land with minimal care, Devikabai now has the flexibility to cultivate other crops and earn additional income from her primary farming.

With visible pride and happiness, Devikabai says, "Bamboo is like our annual pension plan." The crop now brings her both economic security and peace of mind. Looking ahead, she plans to use the income generated from her bamboo harvest in the fourth year to support her grandchildren's education, ensuring that her hard work today will create opportunities for the next generation.



WAY FORWARD

Industree is scaling the bamboo model across 10–15 states to impact 1 million smallholder women farmers through partnerships with Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana (DAY), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLM). With over 30,000 women already engaged, the next phase focuses on economic empowerment and climate impact. The program aims to expand PPUs, strengthen market linkages for certified bamboo products, and standardize climate-conscious training. A central goal is ensuring value capture rests with women, through collective ownership, certification support, and sustainable income. As India grows in ethical bamboo exports, the program envisions rural women as architects of a regenerative, gender-just climate solution rooted in local land and leadership.

Irrigating Change

How Women Are Transforming Agriculture Through Solar Power

Program in Focus: Women-Led Solar Lift Irrigation (SLI) Program

Inception: 2019

Geography: Madhya Pradesh

Reach: 49 lift irrigation sites in Dindori

Implementing Organisation: PRADAN

Context Theme(s): Water Governance & Scarcity



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Women, who labour to secure water for fields and homes, possess deep knowledge of water access, soil conditions, and seasonal stress, yet remain excluded from irrigation and water management decisions as infrastructure continues to be male-dominated. Addressing water scarcity therefore requires more than technical solutions; it demands strengthening local systems and placing women at the centre of planning and governance. This is what PRADAN's Women-led Solar Lift Irrigation (SLI) program enables.

Under this program, women in tribal villages (particularly in districts like Dindori) are trained to design, operate, and govern solar-powered lift irrigation systems. They build technical skills in system operation and maintenance, water scheduling, bookkeeping, and monitoring, alongside leadership and gender training that strengthens confidence and collective agency. Organised into women-led Water User Groups (WUGs), they mobilise operational funds, set tariffs, manage irrigation schedules, compensate operators, and ensure transparent governance. Each site typically runs a 5-7.5 HP solar pump irrigating 20-25 acres and benefiting around 25 families. Beyond irrigation, women promote crop diversification, multi-tier farming, commercial vegetable cultivation, and bio-input production to support climate-resilient agriculture. As of today, 794 women co-manage 49 SLI sites irrigating nearly 900 acres, with the model being scaled through convergence with State Rural Livelihoods Missions and positioned for replication across India.



Climate-Resilient Agriculture:

Erratic rainfall, groundwater depletion, and prolonged dry seasons have left agriculture largely rainfed. Women-led solar lift irrigation has enabled year-round cultivation of wheat, pulses, vegetables, and oilseeds on land earlier left fallow, strengthening food security and adaptive capacity. By integrating efficient water use, crop diversification, and regenerative practices, women have improved soil health, optimised scarce water resources, and increased productivity under climate stress.



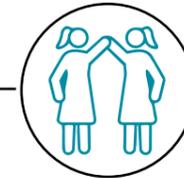
Lower Cost And Sustainability:

Diesel pumps were expensive, polluting, and often inaccessible to women. Solar systems eliminate fuel dependency, reduce operating costs, and function reliably in areas with weak electricity supply. With a lifespan of 15–20 years and resilience to extreme weather, solar irrigation offers a durable, climate-smart alternative while lowering emissions and long-term costs.



Increase In Resources:

By leading not just irrigation efforts but also promoting holistic, regenerative agricultural practices, women contributed to improved yields and more stable incomes. This reduced their reliance on moneylenders- who had often exploited women due to limited access to institutional credit- marking a shift towards greater financial independence and security.



Gender Equality Impact

Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

Stepping into irrigation leadership roles gave women new reasons and social validation- to move beyond their homes. This increased mobility, visibility, and self-confidence. Through women's committees, they gained not just irrigation management skills but also training in book-keeping, negotiation, and governance. This collective space became a platform for shared learning and solidarity, further reinforcing their confidence and social standing. As their contributions became more visible and impactful, women started having a greater say in critical household decisions, leading to a shift in their status and role within families.



Community Level Impact

Community Ownership:

Women led a structured governance model that ensured that the community could come together in trust and cooperation. The water committees would negotiate with the larger community to set reasonable user charges (₹20–₹50 per use), divide plots for creating an irrigation schedule that suits everyone, and regularly revise rules to ensure accountability and fairness. This turned the irrigation system into a truly community-owned and managed asset.



Self-Reliance:

As primary household managers and less likely to migrate, women brought consistency and accountability to the stewardship of irrigation systems. Their reliable presence and long-term commitment along with the durability of solar infrastructure, reinforced a growing sense of self-reliance and community trust on the solution.



Climate-Level Impact

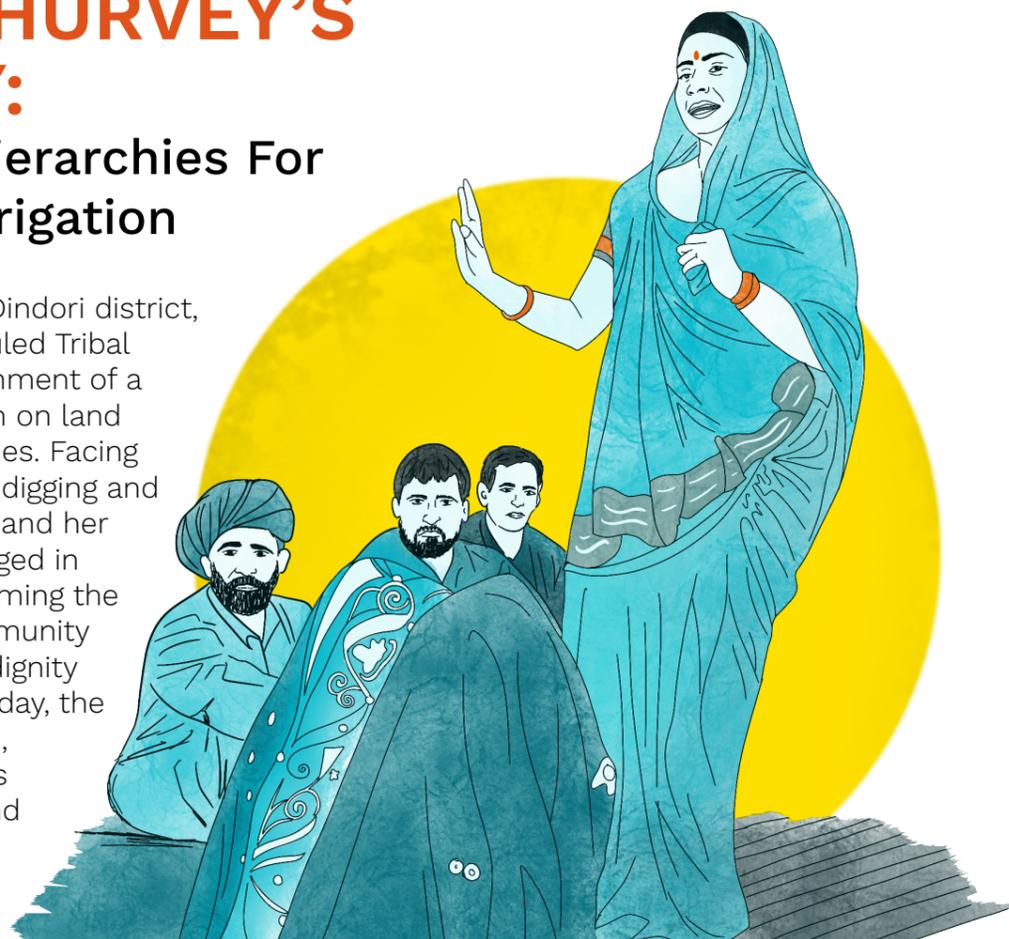


SAVITA DHURVEY'S JOURNEY:

Challenging Hierarchies For Sustainable Irrigation

In Bhakha Ryt village of Dindori district, Savita Dhurvey, a Scheduled Tribal woman, led the establishment of a solar lift irrigation system on land dominated by OBC families. Facing resistance during trench digging and land negotiations, Savita and her women's collective engaged in sustained dialogue, reframing the project as a shared community benefit and a matter of dignity and equitable access. Today, the system irrigates 25 acres, supports over 30 farmers cultivating vegetables, and generates additional incomes of ₹30,000-40,000 per farmer. The

29-member WUG has pooled ₹37,000 for maintenance, and the site now serves as a learning hub for neighbouring villages, demonstrating women-led water governance in practice.



WAY FORWARD

To scale the model, upfront capital support through schemes such as PM-KUSUM, MGNREGA, TADP, and state livelihood missions is critical, alongside sustained engagement with district and block administrations. With 49 operational SLI sites in Dindori, strong field demonstrations, capacity building, and institutional convergence are helping embed women-led irrigation and WUG-governed, climate-resilient agriculture into district and state planning. The model's durability rests on low operating costs, robust solar infrastructure, collective financing, and, most importantly, women's governance and community ownership, ensuring sustainability beyond project timelines.

Changing Currents

The South Asian Water (SAWA) Leadership Programme And Beyond

Program in Focus: South Asian Water (SAWA) Fellowship and Leadership Programme on Climate Change

Inception: 2005

Geography: South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka)

Reach: 307 fellows

Implementing Organisation: SaciWATERS (South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies) and Partner Universities

Context Theme(s): Water Governance & Scarcity



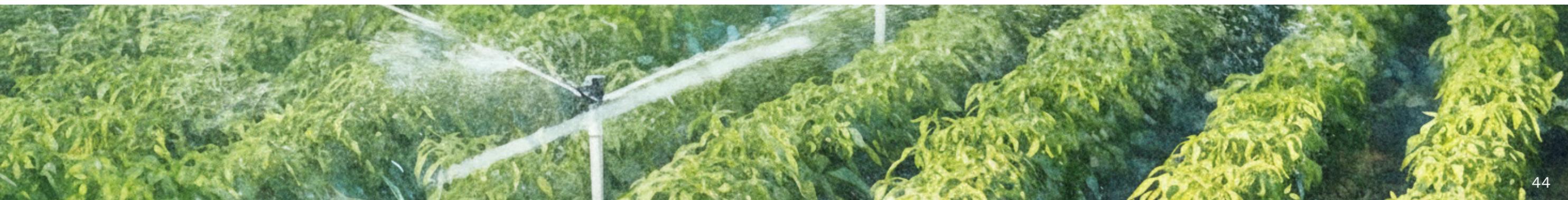
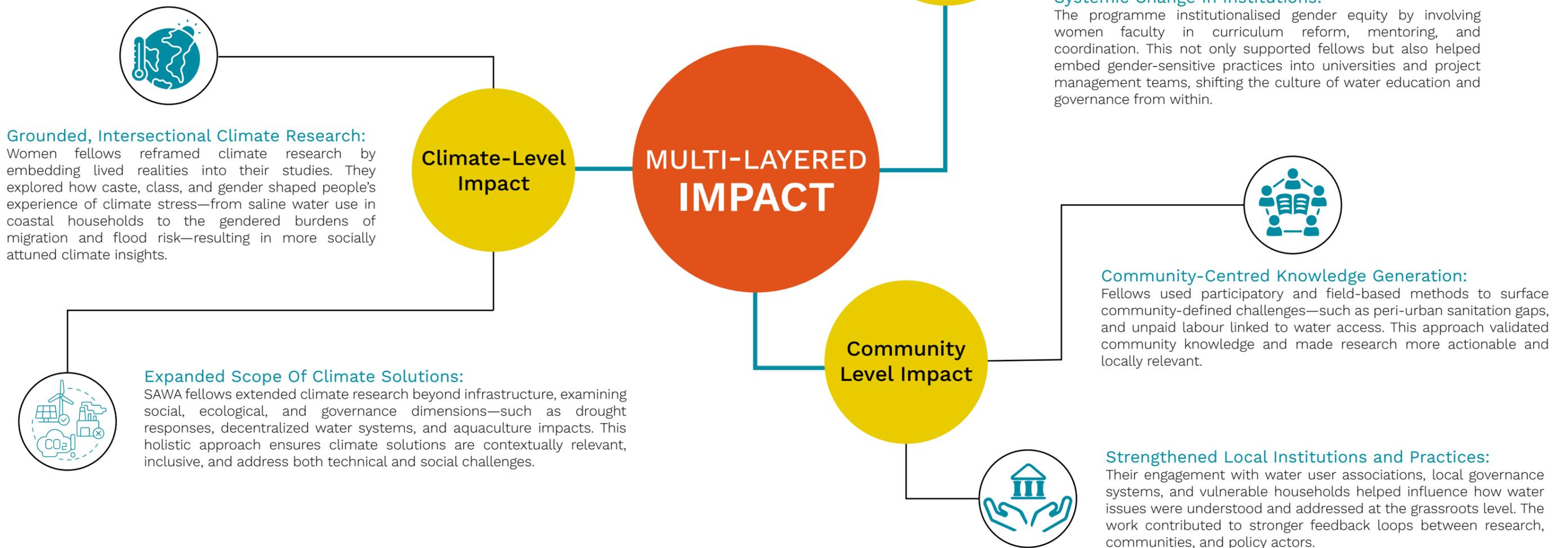
WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Water governance in South Asia has long been dominated by technical disciplines like civil engineering and hydrology, resulting in a lack of interdisciplinarity and marginalizing critical ecological, social, gendered, and community dimensions. Women, despite being most affected by water scarcity and climate variability, have been systematically underrepresented in decision-making. Structural barriers, ranging from rigid academic environments to technocratic institutional cultures, have further limited women's participation and the integration of diverse knowledge systems in water solutions.

The South Asian Water (SAWA) Leadership Programme was launched as a long-term response to systemic gender inequities in South Asia's water sector. It builds on the foundational work of the Crossing Boundaries Project (2006–2011), which introduced interdisciplinary, gender-sensitive IWRM (Integrated Water Resources Management) education in collaboration with four regional engineering universities, Anna University (India), Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Bangladesh), Nepal Engineering College, and the University of Peradeniya (Sri Lanka). While the Crossing Boundaries Project focused on curriculum reform, faculty capacity-building, knowledge co-creation, higher education and mid-career training, and policy advocacy, SAWA sharpened the focus on supporting women professionals through higher education pathways, recognizing that short-term interventions alone could not shift entrenched institutional cultures.

SAWA is anchored in fellowship-based support for Master's and Ph.D. degrees in Integrated Water Resources Management, weaving gender equity and interdisciplinarity into both

pedagogy and practice. Engineering students undertake credit courses not only on the technical aspects of water, but also on gender and equity, complemented by thematic modules on governance, ecology, and climate change, among others. Community-based research is rooted in field challenges like governance, institutional resilience, gender, climatic disasters, water security, sanitation, and migration, and faculty engagement ensures curricular reform and institutional ownership for lasting impact. Furthermore, the program breaks structural barriers to women's leadership by offering flexible timelines, peer support, caregiving allowances, and child-friendly workshops, while fellows also benefit from mentorship, international exposure, policy publishing, and alumni networks, enabling meaningful cross-country collaboration and shaping the future of local practice and policy in the water sector.



RABEYA SULTANA LEYA

The Balancing Act

Rabeya, SAWA Fellow from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Batch 1, was in the early months of pregnancy when she was selected for the programme. Unsure if she would be allowed to continue, she was relieved and encouraged when the SAWA committee supported her decision to stay on. Though she missed the initial training in Nepal, she was offered the chance to attend the following year's session in Chennai instead. She carried her baby to field surveys, participated in training sessions, completed her thesis, and successfully earned her degree—all while navigating new motherhood. Throughout, the programme offered consistent flexibility and support, making her journey both possible and memorable.



WAY FORWARD

The future of the SAWA Leadership Programme rests on deepening and scaling the systemic shifts it has set in motion—moving beyond individual fellowships to embed interdisciplinary, gender-equity-focused modules into mainstream technical curricula across universities, building faculty capacity for inclusive teaching, and institutionalizing participatory, field-based research as core academic practice. At the policy level, SAWA's demonstrated impact provides a field-tested template to inform curriculum reform, accreditation, and professional standards in STEM and climate education, while its adaptable principles offer relevance for allied sectors such as agriculture, disaster risk, and urban planning. Making sustained investment in women's leadership and collaborative, cross-institutional learning is the key to transforming SAWA's innovations into wide-reaching regional change.

Climate Collectives

Women Driving Collaborative Rural Resilience In Gujarat

Program in Focus: Project Asmita

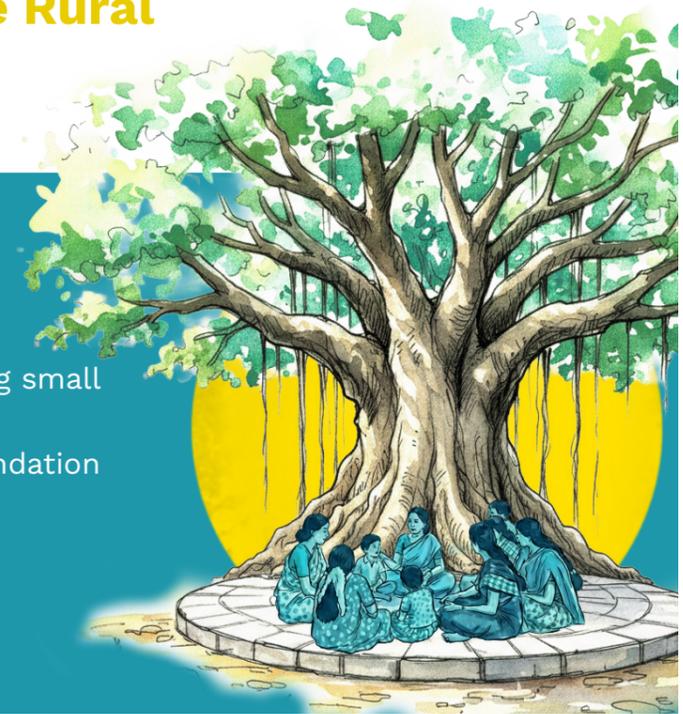
Inception: 2017

Geography: Gujarat

Reach: 79 villages, 6000 individuals including small & marginalised farmers, single women, PwDs

Implementing Organisation: Aatapi Seva Foundation and Supported by PI Foundation

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices, Water Governance & Scarcity, Climate-Induced Migration, Gender-Based Violence



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Project Asmita was created to address the combined challenges of climate stress and gender marginalization by strengthening and expanding women's existing roles as organizers and leaders within their communities. Built on a three-tier institutional framework of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs), and Block-Level Federations, the initiative formalizes women's leadership and creates platforms where they collectively engage with markets, government schemes, banks, dairy cooperatives, and development priorities. For instance, the Mahila Vikas Mandal Jambusar connects women to social entitlements, while the Ujas cooperative facilitates microfinance. Women bring community concerns to Gram Sabhas and interface directly with government agriculture and dairy departments.

Their economic strategies reflect local resilience, including salinity-tolerant farming, dairy incomes, and small enterprises like tailoring and food processing, all identified through participatory assessments and supported by women-led federations. Training covers agronomy, enterprise, leadership, digital literacy, and strategic thinking. Aatapi supports agri-leaders in each village by linking them with technical experts. Women also transform local markets through CLF-led enterprises managing procurement, inventory, branding, and sales, using digital records and farmer diaries reviewed by local leaders to award climate-resilience initiatives like solar batteries, enhancing visibility and community trust.

Crucially, Asmita engages household and community gatekeepers to reshape norms, demonstrating how women's leadership benefits families and communities. Public recognition and peer learning recast women as central resilience actors. Simultaneously,

Aatapi works with officials to ease procedural barriers, reducing unnecessary travel and social interruptions. Over time, government agencies increasingly partner with these women leaders and federations for outreach and program implementation, affirming not just their potential, but the leadership they already exercise.

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Climate-Level Impact

Restoring Land And Regenerating Ecosystem:

Women have played a central role in transforming over 80 hectares of barren or degraded land into productive farmland using organic and regenerative methods. A key component of this effort is community-led soil testing—women are trained to regularly assess soil health, which allows them to make informed, need-based decisions about nutrient management. Combined with the use of homemade organic fertilisers and bio-pesticides, this reduces chemical dependency and lowers greenhouse gas emissions typically associated with synthetic inputs. These practices not only restore the fertility and carbon-sequestering capacity of soil, but also make the land more resilient to climate stresses such as salinity, drought, and nutrient depletion.

Climate-Resilient Agriculture:

Moving beyond monoculture cotton cultivation, women are leading a shift toward diversified cropping systems that combine intercropping, border cropping, and livestock integration under what is locally known as the “ATM model” (All Time Money). This model ensures that income flows throughout the year while enhancing land productivity and reducing ecological pressure. The reduced reliance on chemical inputs, more efficient land use, and focus on biodiversity-friendly practices together support a lower-emission, more climate-resilient agricultural model.

Community Level Impact

Strengthening Local Systems:

As women’s SHGs and federations become more integrated into village-level processes, they have strengthened the functioning of local institutions themselves. Their regular engagement with government departments, Gram Sabhas, and service providers has improved the flow of information and accountability within the community—whether related to agriculture, entitlements, or climate advisories. Over time, this has led to more responsive governance and increased access to schemes not just for SHG members, but for the wider community. Crucially, the presence of organised women’s platforms has helped local institutions become more inclusive, coordinated, and effective in addressing shared village concerns

Collective Ownership:

Transitioning to organic and diversified farming has not been automatic—particularly for small and marginal farmers who were concerned about short-term yield drops. The program worked through Community Resource Persons (CRPs) and SHGs to create a peer-led, integrated support structure that guided hesitant farmers through the transition. The collective nature of this approach helped build trust, reduce risks, and frame the shift as a community-owned journey rather than an externally imposed agenda.

Gender Equality Impact

Expanding Women’s Institutional Power:

Women’s increased participation in SHGs, federations, and collective enterprises has also opened doors to spaces traditionally dominated by men—such as financial institutions, agriculture extension services, and block-level governance structures. Women now engage directly with bank officials, government departments, and senior bureaucrats, often representing their collectives in formal negotiations. This shift has required—and catalyzed—a cultural change: families and local leaders are increasingly supportive of women’s mobility and public presence, recognizing that their leadership translates into tangible gains for the household and community

Reframing Women’s Roles And Identities:

By earning through solar product sales and services, women gained independent income streams. They used earnings to buy school supplies, contribute to household savings, or invest in livestock. For many, this was the first time they controlled money directly. It reduced dependence on moneylenders, who often charged exploitative interest, and strengthened women’s voices in family decisions about spending, farming, and even children’s education.



RAMILABEN

A Torchbearer Of Change

Ramilaben, from Thanava village in Jambusar, transformed from a homemaker into a community leader through the ASMITA project supported by PI Foundation and AATAPI Seva Foundation. As a member of the Swaminarayan Swasahay Group, she gained confidence, financial literacy, and leadership skills. She has facilitated CC loans worth ₹6,00,000 for six SHGs, supported over 220 women and girls in tailoring training, and organized pickle-making workshops for 30 women. Today, as the Treasurer of the Block Level Federation, Ramilaben stands as an inspiring example of women's empowerment and community-driven change.



WAY FORWARD

Aatapi Seva Foundation plans to build on the foundation laid by Project Asmita by deepening its focus on women's leadership and capacity building. Sustaining the initiative's impact will rely heavily on strengthening the institutional systems already established—particularly the three-tiered structure of SHGs, Cluster-Level Federations, and the Block Federation. There are plans to scale and replicate the model in other geographies, while continuing to strengthen the enabling environment needed for women to lead and sustain development efforts.

Turning Taps

Community-Led Water Security In Nepal

Program in Focus: Community-led Household Water Supply

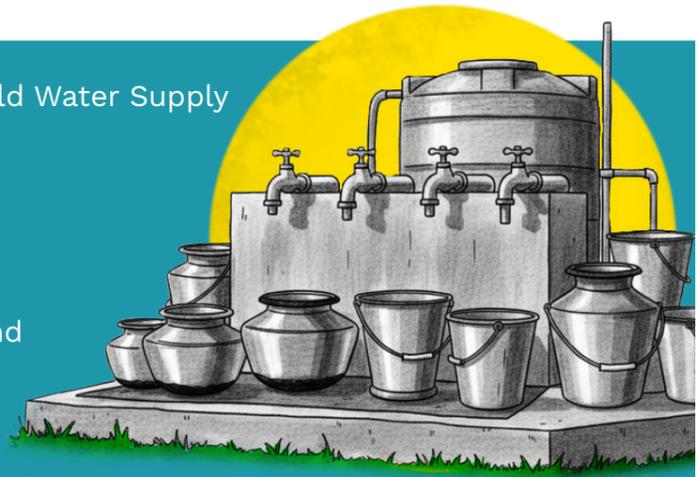
Inception: 2022

Geography: Nepal

Reach: 922+ people in Lapse Kotdanda in Godawari Municipality

Implementing Organisation: Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO), with support from BORDA (Bremen Overseas Research and Development Association)

Context Theme(s): Water Governance & Scarcity



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

In 2020, Nepal faced a deepening water crisis: only 18% of the population had access to safely managed drinking water. Despite piped coverage reaching over 50%, nearly half relied on unregulated sources like private tube wells, exacerbating inequality and insecurity. The burden fell disproportionately on women, who, due to a longstanding gendered division of labor, were responsible for securing water. They navigated hilly terrains in extreme temperatures, stood in long queues, and carried water home for daily chores. This relentless, unpaid labor came at a steep cost, causing health strain, limiting time for education or income generation, and reducing participation in economic and community life.

However, women emerged at the forefront of solving a long-standing crisis of not just water scarcity but also lack of accessible water infrastructure in Nepal. Women became the planners, technicians, and stewards of change. They grouped together, and coordinated with ENPHO, BORDA, and the Godawari Municipality, to lead the transformation of a 45-year-old reservoir into a self-sustained, community-owned water supply network. The vision was simple but powerful: ensure safe, continuous, and equal access to water for every household, a vision that took shape through the “One Household One Tap” scheme. This approach ensured that each home was directly connected to the community water network through an individual tap, guaranteeing regular and equitable water access.

This was not an intervention only at the infrastructure level, it aimed to bring about changes in how water was governed as well. Women received targeted training in Water User Committee (WUC) management, water safety planning (WSP), water quality monitoring, village maintenance work (VMW), and system operation and maintenance (O&M). Equipped with these technical, managerial, and governance skills, they began confidently engaging in decision-making, conducting repairs, monitoring water safety, and overseeing daily

operations.

Their leadership made the system stronger and more self-reliant. A structured user fee system, managed by the WUCs, generated a community fund of over Rs. 2,00,000, providing financial resilience for maintenance and emergencies. With formal recognition from the municipality, women gained not just roles, but authority, anchoring the long-term sustainability of the water supply system.

Reframing The Problem:

A key shift led by women in Kotdanda was reframing the challenge from general water scarcity to the more specific issue of water inaccessibility. This seemingly subtle but powerful insight redirected system design efforts—from expanding supply alone to ensuring equitable, household-level access. It was this reframing that made the “One Household One Tap” scheme central to the intervention. By centering access, women helped design a system that responded to everyday lived realities and built long-term climate resilience into infrastructure.



Climate-Level Impact

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Community Level Impact

Self-Reliance:

Women took on responsibility for operations and maintenance—repairing pipelines, monitoring quality, and managing daily functionality. This localized system management, led by women trained in technical and financial areas, reduced reliance on external actors and improved long-term sustainability.



Community Ownership And Equity:

The initiative succeeded in transforming water access into a shared, equitable community good. The introduction of household tap connections, guided by women leaders' insistence on fairness, helped bridge disparities across caste, class, and proximity to existing water sources. The metering system promoted responsible usage, while the establishment of a structured user fee model—managed entirely by the WUCs—generated a significant local corpus for emergency repairs and maintenance. Institutionalising of these practices helped the community develop a sense of ownership over the initiative.

Resilient Water Governance:

Women's participation in Water User Committees (WUCs) transformed these platforms into active listening spaces and local problem-solving hubs. With reserved decision-making roles, women highlighted issues often overlooked by male governance—such as water needs during menstruation and pregnancy, the burden of water collection, and safety concerns during early or late collection. These perspectives reshaped water system priorities and design, making them adaptive and resilient. Women trained in water safety planning, system maintenance, and repair ensured technical breakdowns, especially during climate stresses, were addressed quickly and locally. The outcome was a water system that was more inclusive, robust, and capable of ongoing climate adaptation with embedded community capacity.



Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

This initiative redefined women's roles and self-perception in their communities. With household tap installations, women no longer spent hours fetching water daily, freeing time for rest, health, education, and income activities. Women received training and compensation for technical roles like plumbing, water quality monitoring, financial oversight, and system maintenance—roles traditionally held by men. This marked a shift from invisible caretakers to skilled professionals. Initially hesitant and met with resistance, women gained confidence and recognition as effective leaders. Their leadership became normalized as a structural change, not just symbolic. This transformation increased women's visibility and influence within their communities.



Gender Equality Impact

New Livelihood Pathways:

Engagement in infrastructure work opened up alternative livelihoods for women, challenging occupational gender norms and providing a pathway to economic empowerment. This not only created income opportunities but also expanded the horizon of what was seen as 'appropriate' work for women within the community.



SABINA TAMANG

Shifting The Lens

Sabina Tamang, a resident of Ward 6, understood like other women that the water crisis could only be resolved if the community came together to ensure a tap in each household. She had a firm understanding of the water geography of the area and understood that the problem was lack of infrastructure rather than a lack of water in itself. She came forward to actively participate in Water Use Committees (WUCs), understood the technicalities of water infrastructure and management, and became the driving force behind installation of household taps as well as a metering system. Sabina now experiences the difference firsthand: water access is reliable, household work is easier, and the community manages usage more responsibly- a welcome change in routines and relationships with water.



WAY FORWARD

Challenges like uneven terrain, weak municipal engagement, and persistent gender norms continue to affect replication and pace across wards. With the Lapse Kotdanda model influencing nearby areas like Changunarayan Municipality (potentially benefiting over 6,000 people) strengthening municipal partnerships and institutional recognition of Water User Committees remains critical. Long-term sustainability rests on women-led governance, financial autonomy through user fees, and formal municipal anchoring, supported by ongoing technical and managerial training for women leaders.

Systems & Self-Shakti

A Peer-Led Model For Women And Climate Resilience

Program in Focus: Buzz Green

Inception: 2019

Geography: Karnataka

Reach: 13000+ women Community Anchors (Gelathis), 12,000 Green Motivators across 13 districts

Implementing Organisation: Buzz India Trust

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices, Water Governance & Scarcity, Climate-Induced Migration, Gender-Based Violence



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

In Karnataka's water-stressed regions, failing farms, drying wells, and hotter, drier seasons are straining households and driving seasonal migration. Women carry the heaviest burden by spending long hours fetching water, eating less so others can eat, and taking on more care work. Climate pressures also exacerbate domestic violence, as financial and ecological stress intensifies tensions within households.

In response to these layered crises, women are building their own solidarity and leadership, with Buzz Women's Buzz Green program acting as an anchor. Their approach begins with a simple but radical premise: leadership doesn't have to be appointed, it can be claimed. And across Karnataka, thousands of women are doing just that.

The journey begins with Self-Shakti, a two-day foundational training delivered in villages via Buzz Buses, mobile classrooms that overcome distance and infrastructure barriers. The training covers financial literacy, self-reflection, and livelihood resilience. On day two, women who feel ready voluntarily step forward, and peers elect a Gelathi ("friend" in Kannada), a community anchor to lead the work. Gelathis then join the Spoorthi Fellowship, where they build leadership, emotional strength, and problem-solving skills. They convene monthly Beehive Meetings, gathering 30-35 women to reflect and act on issues from domestic violence to water scarcity. These peer-led platforms reinforce agency and collective action over time.

Today, over 13,000 Gelathis reach nearly one million women through this voluntary, trust-based leadership. From these circles, Hasiru Prerakis (Green Motivators) lead climate action locally, starting with kitchen gardens and composting, growing into champions

mobilizing communities around seed sovereignty and ecological resilience. Nagarika Sakhis, trained women, engage Gram Sabhas and Panchayats to ensure women's needs shape public decisions. Importantly, grassroots leaders form AvalaBuzz (HerBuzz), an advisory board ensuring Buzz Women's internal decisions remain grounded in lived experience, keeping the organization closely connected to the field.

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Climate-Level Impact

Behaviour Change At Scale:

Buzz Women enabled large-scale shifts in everyday practices that directly reduced environmental strain at the household level. An overwhelming 91% of women adopted at least one new climate-resilient behaviour—ranging from reducing plastic use and carrying cloth bags to planting trees. These visible, replicable actions normalised eco-consciousness across villages and demonstrated that sustainability could begin with simple, consistent behaviour changes embedded in daily life.

Strengthening Household Ecological Resilience:

Kitchen gardening emerged as a particularly powerful tool—providing women with immediate, tangible benefits. Those who maintained kitchen gardens reported average monthly savings of ₹508, reducing reliance on unpredictable markets and increasing food security in times of climate or economic stress. Beyond the household, kitchen gardens also helped lower carbon footprints by reducing the distance food travels from farm to plate. In parallel, 88% of women set concrete conservation goals, with many focusing on improving their local environment through tree planting, waste reduction, and water body clean-ups. These initiatives built household-level buffers against environmental shocks.

Community Level Impact

Institutional Linkages And Local Governance Influence:

Through platforms like Beehives and with support from Nagarika Sakhis, women increasingly engaged with local governance—33% interacted with panchayat members, 35% with PDOs, and 60% with Anganwadi workers to raise issues ranging from waste to water access. This engagement helped translate grassroots efforts into institutional recognition and action, anchoring the community's climate resilience within existing governance systems.

Community Ownership:

One of the most significant shifts was the transition from individual awareness to community mobilisation. As women grew in confidence, 86% actively encouraged others to take up climate-positive behaviours—creating a culture of shared responsibility. Over half of the Beehive groups initiated local environmental actions, such as repairing drainage and restoring water sources. These locally defined responses tackled immediate climate risks while building a sense of community ownership over common resources.

Gender Equality Impact

Increase In Resources:

Sixty-eight percent of participants reported taking steps toward income generation—ranging from starting small enterprises to managing household-level savings more proactively. Among those who launched businesses (supported by Buzz Vyapar), 61% reported improved ability to meet household expenses. Kitchen gardens, promoted under Buzz Green, also became a reliable source of monthly savings (averaging ₹508).

Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

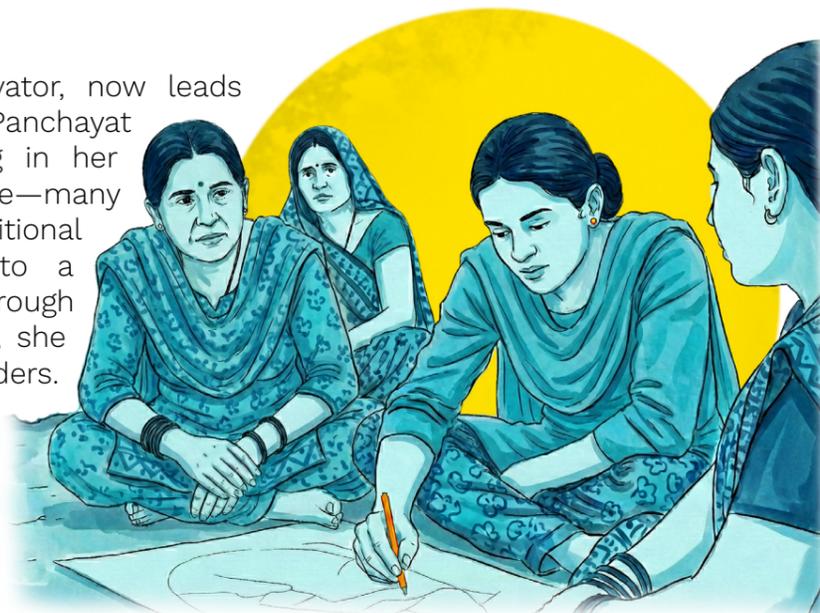
Economic shifts translated into greater say in household decisions. Eighty percent of women now participate in financial decision-making—opening bank accounts, purchasing livestock, and planning household expenditures independently. Many women—especially Gelathis trained under the Spoorthi Fellowship—were seen influencing not just their homes but also collective priorities in their communities. Leadership, once reserved for men or external actors, began emerging from within.



ANUSUYA'S JOURNEY

Using Self-Belief To Drive Community Change

Anusuya, a trained Green Motivator, now leads groundwater mapping for her Panchayat and champions organic farming in her village. At first, she faced resistance—many were sceptical of changing traditional practices and unaccustomed to a woman taking charge. But through persistence and quiet conviction, she built trust with key stakeholders. Today, the community turns to her for guidance. What sustained her was a deep belief that she was the right person for the task—not only because she understood the land and its ecology, but because she understood her people. It was this self-belief that enabled her to lead lasting, community-level change.



WAY FORWARD

Informal platforms like Beehives and leadership roles such as Nagarika Sakhis lack formal recognition in governance, limiting women's negotiating power and resource access. Capacity-building for Gelathis, Hasiru prerakis/Green Motivators, and Nagarika Sakhis/citizen friends remains crucial as their roles grow in complexity. The priority is to formalize mature Beehives as Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to bring a sense of legitimacy and integrate women-led climate priorities into public decision-making through partnerships with Panchayats and Women & Child Welfare Departments. To expand beyond Karnataka, Buzz Women launched the Buzz Academy Fellowship to train grassroots leaders from other regions. Systems to capture fellows' learnings will guide broader gender-responsive, climate-smart policies. Sustainability is ensured through phased scale-up training of 10% of women per village and the Gelathis training the rest of the 90% women in that village and the Shakti Fund, where women contribute ₹1 daily as a pay-it-forward contribution to build financial ownership and reduce donor dependence, fostering a cycle of confident women leading climate action and governance influence.

Coastal Storykeepers

Women-Led Community Mapping

Program in Focus: Coastal Grassroots Fellowship (CGF)

Inception: 2022

Geography: Tamil Nadu and Odisha

Reach: 3 districts, 2 cohorts

Implementing Organisation: Dakshin Foundation

Context Theme(s): Coastal Erosion



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

The Coastal Grassroots Fellowship (CGF) emerged as Dakshin Foundation's carefully designed response to the long-standing exclusion of small-scale fisherwomen (SSF) from public discourse and decision-making around matters of the coast. It recognized and amplified the leadership that already existed within these communities by creating space for women to document their lived realities, express their perspectives, and influence governance as storytellers, researchers, and coastal advocates. Through participatory mapping, shared memory exercises, and local history documentation, the fellows generated rich repositories of knowledge, on coastal erosion, fishing zones, and cultural commons, that challenged extractive development narratives and were shared in panchayat meetings and local forums to assert community rights and recognition.

Central to this process was the act of storytelling, used not only to record realities but also to resist invisibilization. Women documented declining fish catch, migration, and shifting rituals through photo essays, oral histories, and poems; many of these were published on Tamil platforms and shared at public exhibitions and academic forums. For many, it was the first time their voices were not just heard, but acknowledged as legitimate and powerful.

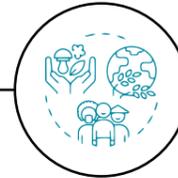
The fellowship did not impose a fixed curriculum; rather, it offered flexible learning spaces shaped by the women themselves, through dialogue, reflection, and field-based enquiry. More than a capacity-building programme, the CGF helped nurture collective spaces where grassroots leadership could take root and thrive. Fellows who were once excluded from village meetings began presenting at regional and national forums, and women-led reading circles emerged as spaces for critical dialogue and reflection.



Lived Knowledge Based Coastal Management:

Through maps, oral histories, and storytelling, women documented ecological changes—like erosion, declining fish catch, and degraded commons—grounded in long-term observation and cultural memory. This offered textured insights that went beyond technical assessments, enabling more responsive climate adaptation. This community-authored data enriched climate planning with locally specific insights and began influencing panchayat decisions and development plans, challenging top-down definitions of valid environmental evidence.

Climate-Level Impact



Linking Ecological Resilience With Cultural Continuity:

By capturing rituals, oral traditions, and everyday coastal practices, fellows revealed how climate impacts disrupt not just ecosystems but community identity and heritage. Their work reframed environmental resilience as inseparable from cultural survival, advocating for climate responses that protect both nature and the social fabric that sustains it.



Community Level Impact

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT



Reframing Women's Roles And Identities:

The fellowship enabled a powerful shift in how women saw themselves—and how they were seen by their communities. Once sidelined in public and decision-making spaces, fellows emerged as storytellers, researchers, and advocates, with the confidence to speak at village meetings, publish creative work, and engage with governance. Their leadership challenged traditional gender norms, expanded their presence beyond domestic and informal labour roles, and helped reshape local perceptions of who holds knowledge and authority in coastal communities.

Building Community-Owned Knowledge Systems:

The fellowship catalyzed lasting structures—like women-led reading circles and peer learning spaces—that enabled communities to document, reflect, and engage with local issues on their own terms. These became platforms for dialogue, critical thinking, and collective action, laying the groundwork for sustained civic participation and locally anchored leadership.



Gender Equality Impact



Reclaiming And Strengthening Community Identity:

By drawing from everyday experience, ancestral knowledge, and shared memory, women surfaced the deeper meanings embedded in coastal life—its rituals, relationships, and cultural rhythms. What emerged wasn't just documentation, but a powerful reaffirmation of who the community is and what it values. This helped counter the invisibilization often brought on by extractive development, asserting a place-based identity rooted in care, continuity, and interdependence.

Women Reshaping Systems—Not Just Entering Them:

Rather than simply fitting into pre-existing models of leadership or learning, women actively redefined them. The fellowship was shaped around collective dialogue, field-based enquiry, and cultural expression—forms of engagement that emerged from the women themselves. By anchoring the programme in their ways of knowing and leading, fellows helped design participatory, reflective, and inclusive models that challenge top-down, technocratic templates. This shift has implications beyond the fellowship: it demonstrates how feminist leadership can reconfigure systems, not just access them.



MUTHULAKSHMI

Breaking Boundaries



Muthulakshmi, a B.Com (Computer Applications) graduate from a coastal village, grew up under strict gender norms that confined women to domestic roles. Joining the Coastal Grassroots Fellowship (CGF) marked her first entry into public life, despite social backlash—including a villager mocking her publicly, for stepping out in the public space. Supported by her family and co-fellows, the fellowship became a turning point: the stipend supported her children's education, and she built skills in public speaking, critical thinking, and leadership. She entered male-dominated spaces like fishing boats and Oor Panchayat meetings, raised waste management issues, and spoke at the Kadalur Grama Sabha on the CZMP (Coastal Zone Management Plan), defending the mapping of fishing villages against industrial threats. She expanded her public engagement through Fisher Grievances Day, submitted petitions to the district collector, and post-fellowship, became a Survey Coordinator leading a team of six. With Dakshin's support, she was selected for the Azim Premji University Photo Essay Internship, documenting community stories across Ramanathapuram. Her essay is set to be exhibited publicly—an unthinkable achievement just a year earlier. Now part of a women-led Community Book Reading Circle and national networks like the Indian Fisherwomen Assembly, she continues to confront social constraints while pushing for a longer fellowship duration, recognizing it as a space not just for learning but for unlearning restrictions, building collective leadership, and expanding the boundaries of where women belong.

WAY FORWARD

The Coastal Grassroots Fellowship is now focused on strengthening post-fellowship pathways by building sustained mentorship structures, peer support networks, and opportunities for continued public engagement. Recognizing the persistent barriers fellows face—including limited digital access, mobility restrictions, and the undervaluing of women's knowledge in governance—the programme is designing longer-term scaffolding to support grassroots leadership beyond the fellowship year. It is also working to build institutional linkages that can integrate women's knowledge into formal decision-making processes and developing an ecosystem of alumni who can collaborate, share learnings, and amplify collective action for equitable governance of coastal and marine commons.

Authors: Aarthika Ravi (Programme Associate), Nayana Udayashankar (Senior Programme Officer), Aarthi Sridhar (Programme Head)

Leaders For Commons

Women Steering Grassroots Governance For Climate- Resilient Futures

Program in Focus: Leaders for Commons (LfC)

Inception: 2022

Geography: Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Odisha

Reach: 6 states, 18 districts and 40 blocks

Implementing Organisation: Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)

Context Theme(s): Exclusionary Commons Management



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

When women step into formal roles within Panchayats and local self-governance, they bring a deep, grounded understanding of Commons, including land, water, and forests, and their vital role in sustaining rural livelihoods and resilience. Their leadership is essential for shaping development and climate responses rooted in lived realities.

Strengthening this leadership is not about introducing new actors, but about recognizing and enabling the leadership women already practice informally. The Leaders for Commons (LfC) programme by the Foundation for Ecological Security supports elected women representatives (EWRs) to navigate governance spaces more effectively and influence decisions on managing Commons, including pasturelands, forests, water bodies, land use, and restoration. LfC is an experiential learning platform where women learn from each other, drawing on existing knowledge and strengthening collective confidence and action. The programme reinforces women as co-creators of local socio-ecological futures, not merely implementers of external agendas. It uses a blended learning format, combining in-person and virtual engagement, and fostering peer learning and solidarity.

Women share experiences, reflect on challenges, and many have begun taking action, such as questioning land-use proposals, influencing MGNREGA plans, and leading restoration activities. Capacity-building around data use enables sharper analysis in policy spaces, helping women advocate priorities grounded in both experience and evidence. Crucially, LfC provides space for women to reflect on their power within local governance, recognizing constraints and gaps between perception and practice, and developing strategies to assert influence within existing realities.



Lived Knowledge Based Climate Action:

Women leaders brought firsthand experience of environmental stress—dwindling water sources, overgrazed Commons, erratic rainfall—into local decision-making. This helped shift conversations from abstract planning to tangible priorities, resulting in climate responses that were both ecologically relevant and locally owned.

Climate-Level Impact



Commons As Climate Buffers:

With stronger participation from women, decisions around managing pasturelands, water bodies, and forest resources became more adaptive to changing climate realities. Leaders pushed for sustainable land-use choices and ecological restoration measures by reviewing MGNREGA plans, questioning extractive land-use proposals, and advocating for conservation-centric approaches in all levels of village decision-making.



Community Level Impact

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT



Increased Confidence In Leadership:

LfC helped women build confidence to lead locally—raising issues in Gram Sabhas, engaging with officials, and asserting their role in planning and decision-making. They also became adept users of technology, connecting with counterparts from other villages, districts, and states to share best practices and access real-time information for decision-making. LfC further linked them to national platforms like 'She Represents', a convening led by Indian School of Democracy (ISD), New Delhi, bringing together elected women leaders to share experiences, build networks, and engage with policymakers. For many participants, this was their first opportunity to represent their work beyond the village, gain recognition, and be part of a national conversation on gender and grassroots governance.

Inclusive And Participatory Local Governance:

Women's increased presence and voice in Panchayats helped create space in traditionally male-dominated governance forums. Their participation shifted the tone and content of local deliberations—prioritising issues often overlooked, like water access, fodder availability, and ecosystem health. Through this, governance became more representative, transparent, and accountable to wider community needs.



Peer Networks Driving Collective Action:

Through the programme, women formed cross-regional support systems—helping each other troubleshoot challenges, share learnings, and coordinate responses. For example, in Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, when elected women Sarpanchs were served eviction notices—often due to political pressure or procedural technicalities—fellow leaders from the LfC network came together to offer support. They convened local meetings, raised the issue through official channels, and stood by the affected leaders publicly. This not only helped push back against unjust removals but sent a strong message about collective leadership and solidarity among elected women in governance spaces.

Gender Equality Impact



Claiming Space In Male-Dominated Governance Structures:

Through peer discussions, mentorship, and practical exposure, women assessed where they held influence within the village systems, how decisions were made, and what it would take to be heard. Many began challenging assumptions about their role—asserting their voices in Panchayat meetings, influencing budget decisions, and questioning dominant narratives. This shift—from being present but unheard, to being active, informed, and assertive—signaled a quiet but powerful change in local power equations, led by women on their own terms.



FROM COMMONS TO COMMUNITY

Shanta Devi's Journey of Leadership and Ecological Stewardship

Shanta Devi, Sarpanch of Chakuda Gram Panchayat in Rajasthan, used the LfC programme to strengthen her leadership on Commons governance. She took bold steps to protect pasturelands, initiated planting drives, and improved Anganwadi service delivery. Inspired by exposure visits, she adopted transparent governance practices and championed women's participation. As her tenure ends, she remains committed to mentoring other women leaders in sustainable development.



WAY FORWARD

A priority is keeping each group of leaders connected over time, especially in areas with limited internet access or smartphone ownership. Going forward, the aim is to help cohorts independently continue working on local issues, while supporting alumni to mentor others and spark wider interest in the programme. LfC now plans to reach 1,000 leaders by 2025–26, strengthen alumni networks, and include other local actors—such as male representatives, youth, and frontline workers—to build a wider, community-driven narrative around Commons and climate.

Rising With The Tide

Women-Led Climate Action In The Sundarbans

Program in Focus: Sanrakshan

Inception: 2016

Geography: West Bengal

Reach: 32 villages, 88 women farmers, 301 families, 25 Community Resource Groups

Implementing Organisation: Goranbose Gram Bikash Kendra (GGBK)

Context Theme(s): Water Governance & Scarcity, Gender-Based Violence



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Women in the Sundarbans have long led resilience efforts, drawing on ecological knowledge, lived experience, and strong community bonds. To amplify this leadership, Goranbose Gram Bikash Kendra (GGBK) supported the growth of women's collective platforms.

Women and adolescent girls formed Climate Resilience Groups, peer-led spaces to exchange knowledge, plan disaster preparedness, and link climate justice with concerns such as gender-based violence. These groups became hubs for solidarity and action. Training on sustainable agriculture, digital and financial literacy, and gender rights enabled women to emerge as educators and decision-makers. They drove a shift toward resilient livelihoods, cultivating salt-tolerant crops, creating floating gardens, and practicing organic farming that restored food security and reduced external dependence.

Living in disaster-prone areas, women expanded their efforts beyond agriculture, leading community mapping, early warnings, and emergency drills. GGBK strengthened these efforts by linking them to programmes such as MGNREGA and housing schemes, and by equipping women to engage public officials for entitlements and disaster response. Work with men and boys on gender equity helped shift norms and build shared ownership of women-led climate action. Within households, women also nurtured stronger parent-child relationships, ensuring girls' safety and wellbeing during crises.



Climate-Resilient Agriculture:

By adopting salt-tolerant crops, organic farming, composting, and floating gardens, women transformed agricultural practices into systems that not only withstood rising salinity and erratic rainfall but also contributed to climate mitigation. These practices reduced dependence on chemical fertilizers and mechanized irrigation—both of which are emission-intensive. Composting and natural inputs helped restore soil health, and seed preservation reduced reliance on commercial supply chains. Together, these approaches lowered the carbon footprint of farming while restoring ecological balance.



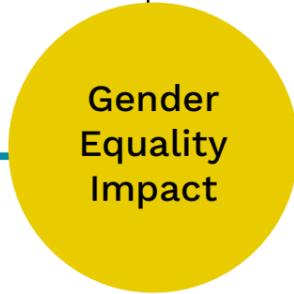
Lived Knowledge Based Climate Action:

Women drew on generations of ecological knowledge to guide farming and land-use decisions in tune with local seasons, soil, and biodiversity. Through practices like seed saving, companion planting, and natural soil care, they worked with the land's rhythms rather than against them.



Local Self-Reliance:

Through adoption of low-cost, locally appropriate technologies, communities reduced their dependency on external inputs and institutions. Women spearheaded efforts to diversify incomes, protect food systems, and tap into public schemes like MGNREGA. In doing so, they began to create localized safety nets that reduced the community's vulnerability to market shocks and climate-related disruptions. Over time, this built the foundations for decentralized resilience—both economic and infrastructural.



Reframing Women's Roles And Identities:

As women took the lead on climate resilience, their identities evolved from caregivers and victims to decision-makers, knowledge holders, and protectors of both community and ecology. This shift expanded their roles in household and village life, while increasing their visibility, voice, and value in the public sphere. Women gained confidence, negotiated more equitable relationships at home, and began influencing how resources and responsibilities were distributed across genders.



Bridging Gender-Based Violence And Climate Justice:

Women in the initiative recognized that climate stress and gender-based violence are interconnected. Through group discussions, peer-led trainings, and crisis-response planning, they developed strategies to prevent violence, including early-warning systems, advocacy against child marriage, and safe access to resources during disasters. By integrating safety, dignity, and bodily autonomy into climate resilience efforts, women ensured that adaptation measures protect both livelihoods and personal security, shifting community norms and making climate action more inclusive and equitable.



Community Ownership:

Women-led Climate Resilience Groups became a powerful vehicle for building shared responsibility around climate adaptation. These peer groups fostered open dialogue, planning, and coordinated action—transforming resilience from an externally driven agenda to a community-owned process. Women's leadership helped engage broader community members, including men and youth, in discussions around land use, farming, water access, and disaster readiness. This sense of collective stewardship strengthened the social foundation for long-term resilience and accountability.



ROKEYA

Sprouting Leadership in Crisis

Along with being a caregiver and pillar of her family, Rokeya Morol has become a vital force in local climate resilience efforts. With training and support from GGBK, Rokeya stepped into public leadership—organizing mock disaster drills, supporting women to access entitlements, and preventing child marriage in her village. After Cyclone Amphan, she mobilized her community to demand safe housing and protect local embankments. Her work is a powerful example of how women's everyday resilience, when recognized and supported, can evolve into collective leadership and systemic change.



WAY FORWARD

In many areas, taboos around women's participation make consistent engagement difficult, and scattered, hard-to-reach settlements limit access to training and support. Addressing this, the focus moving forward is threefold: first, to deepen local ownership by strengthening women's self-help groups and community-based institutions that can independently manage climate activities and peer learning; second, to improve linkages with government schemes, panchayats, and service providers so that women can access entitlements, inputs, and preparedness tools more reliably; and third, to scale through structured documentation, cross-village learning exchanges, and active involvement of youth to ensure continuity and broader uptake. These steps aim to embed women's climate action in local systems, reduce dependence on external actors, and support long-term, community-led resilience.

Power To Earn

Women-Led Energy Transitions In Rural India

Program in Focus: Working with Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission

Inception: 2022

Geography: Assam

Reach: 50+ climate-resilient/ climate smart microenterprises supported

Implementing Organisation: SELCO Foundation

Context Theme(s): Lack of Reliable Energy



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

In Assam's rural belts, erratic rainfall, delayed sowing seasons, rising heat, floods, and frequent power outages disrupt agriculture and animal husbandry, the backbone of traditional livelihoods. As crop failures grow more common, women increasingly turn to microenterprises such as tailoring, food processing, beauty parlours, and digital service centres to secure household incomes. Yet energy insecurity often locks them out. Grid electricity is unreliable and sometimes absent altogether. High heat makes manual work exhausting, while the lack of appropriate technologies, such as small-scale processing units or solar-powered tailoring machines, prevents women from mechanising drudgery-prone tasks. Livelihood aspirations repeatedly collide with climate-induced limitations, while rural development programmes often treat energy, technology, enterprise, and resilience as separate silos, missing their intersection.

Recognizing this, SELCO Foundation partnered with ASRLM (Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission) and local NGOs to co-create a model where women identify livelihood opportunities, co-design energy solutions, access finance through SHGs and bank linkages, and build climate-resilient enterprises. ASRLM's strong SHG network, rooted in rural communities, brought affordable finance, capacity building, government schemes, and market linkages through platforms like Asomi and Saras Mela.

Central to the programme is a community-led design approach shaped by women's voices. From deciding businesses and pinpointing energy-climate challenges to shaping repayment models, women are co-creators. Access to finance is another pillar; instead of navigating complex systems alone, women are supported in securing credit, subsidies, and schemes. Partnerships among ASRLM, NRLM, Panchayati Raj, and financial institutions streamline loan

processes, strengthening both women's financial stability and lenders' inclusion goals.

Beyond technology or credit, the programme builds long-term entrepreneurial capacity. Women are trained not only to operate climate-smart, solar-powered solutions, but also to manage businesses, track costs, troubleshoot, and mentor peers. Training of SRLM staff, NGOs, and resource persons ensures that support for climate-resilient livelihoods is institutionally embedded and scalable across districts.

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Climate-Level Impact

Greener Energy For Rural Enterprises:

By replacing polluting, unreliable energy sources with decentralised clean energy, combined with efficient, climate smart technologies (like solar-powered sewing machines, grinders, and cooling systems), women were able to sustain and grow their businesses while reducing emissions.

Gender-Informed Design And Solutions For Climate Resilience:

When women's lived experiences shaped the design of clean energy solutions, technologies were more likely to be adopted, used consistently, and maintained over time. This led to sustained reductions in polluting energy use, less dependence on climate-damaging coping strategies like diesel or firewood, and greater continuity of livelihoods during climate shocks- such as heat stress, droughts and excessive rainfalls- amplifying long-term climate resilience outcomes.

Community Level Impact

Strengthened Local Institutions:

Through the training of ASRLM staff, CRPs, and local NGOs, and the complementary credit access through local banks, energy-livelihood know-how was embedded within the rural development ecosystem. This strengthened the capacity of districts and block-level actors to explore local business and entrepreneurship opportunities, identify climate-linked vulnerabilities and respond with decentralized, locally relevant solutions- beyond the pilot phase.

Local Economic Resilience:

Through the SELCO-ASRLM collaboration, localized livelihood interventions led by grassroots NGOs demonstrated the tangible economic gains of clean energy and climate-smart technology integration. For instance, Sanjog NGO's solar livelihoods (tailoring units, mushroom farms, etc. supported by SELCO Foundation) helped women increase monthly incomes from 5,000 to 15,000. Peer support within SHGs reduced the perceived risk of loans, while platforms like Asomi SARAS Mela provided direct market access, resulting in significant sales and business growth. This combination of predictable earnings, peer backing, and market visibility transformed household finances and built a resilient economic ecosystem, less vulnerable to climate and market shocks.

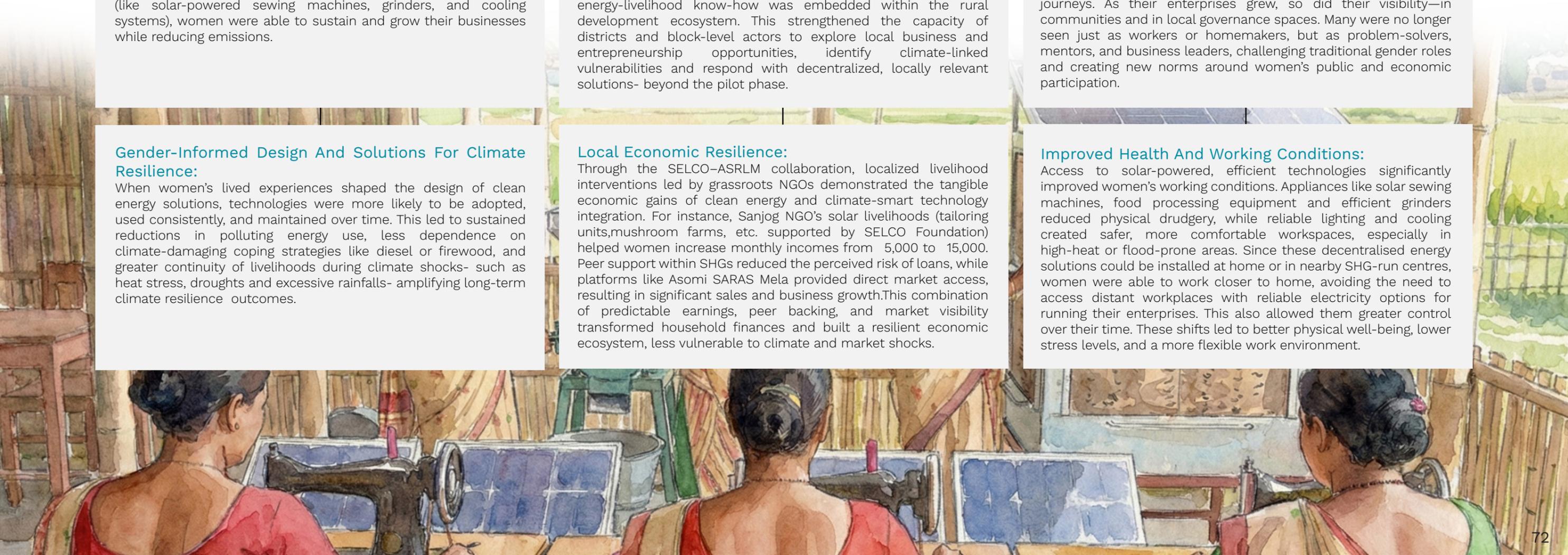
Gender Equality Impact

Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

By choosing technologies, managing credit, and supporting others in their SHGs, women asserted greater control over their economic journeys. As their enterprises grew, so did their visibility—in communities and in local governance spaces. Many were no longer seen just as workers or homemakers, but as problem-solvers, mentors, and business leaders, challenging traditional gender roles and creating new norms around women's public and economic participation.

Improved Health And Working Conditions:

Access to solar-powered, efficient technologies significantly improved women's working conditions. Appliances like solar sewing machines, food processing equipment and efficient grinders reduced physical drudgery, while reliable lighting and cooling created safer, more comfortable workspaces, especially in high-heat or flood-prone areas. Since these decentralised energy solutions could be installed at home or in nearby SHG-run centres, women were able to work closer to home, avoiding the need to access distant workplaces with reliable electricity options for running their enterprises. This also allowed them greater control over their time. These shifts led to better physical well-being, lower stress levels, and a more flexible work environment.



SUMAN SARMA

Powering Livelihoods With The Sun

Suman Sarma, an SHG member from Hahim, Assam, saw how her village lacked access to basic digital services- forcing residents to travel 15 km and spend 80 per trip. Determined to change this, she set up a SochnaPreneur Business Mitra Center with support from the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF). However, erratic power supply limited her earnings to ₹7,000-₹8,000 per month. To fix this, she worked with DEF and SELCO Foundation to solarize the centre, after which her income rose to around ₹20,000 per month, by ensuring higher volumes and daily run-time of the shop. Looking to diversify, she leveraged ASRLM training in food processing and accessed the PMFME scheme (of the Ministry of Food Processing Industries) to invest in a 50-kg solar dryer; benefiting from the credit-linked subsidy while independently securing the remaining loan. With SELCO's technical guidance, she selected the right dryer and now runs both enterprises.



WAY FORWARD

Adoption is not automatic- some women are hesitant to take loans due to perceived financial risk or previous experiences with unreliable products, while others lack family support. On the ecosystem side, accessing finance often involved time-consuming paperwork and required consistent handholding. Going forward, the role of CRPs, SHG leaders, and local NGOs in facilitating financing, technology selection, and follow-up support will continue to be strengthened. Ensuring that clean energy and climate-smart solutions are always linked with business training, market access, and maintenance services will also be essential for long-term viability. The emphasis will remain on creating integrated support systems that allow women to adopt and sustain green and climate-resilient livelihoods independently over time.

Everyday Actions

Adolescent Girls Shaping Water Governance In Assam

Program in Focus: Jal Doot Program

Inception: 2018

Geography: Assam

Reach: 1167+ Jal Shalas held, 30,000+ active Jal Doots

Implementing Organisation: Reap Benefit

Context Theme(s): Water Governance & Scarcity



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Adolescent girls, responsible for water duties at the household level, have lived experience with water that gives them deep insight into local risks and solutions, positioning them to drive change in both behaviour and systems. Understanding this, the Jaldoot Programme began as a civic engagement initiative under the Jal Jeevan Mission in Assam. It equips adolescents, primarily from government schools in rural areas, with the tools and confidence to take leadership on water-related issues in their communities. Focused on students aged 14 to 18, the programme trains them as Jaldoots, or “water ambassadors,” helping them develop practical knowledge and agency to respond to water challenges through local action. In districts where girls often manage daily water needs for their families, including carrying water from distant sources, storing it safely, and monitoring quality, the programme recognizes this expertise and helps extend it beyond the household into public leadership.

Students participate in Jal Shalas, structured workshops that introduce skills such as water quality testing, flood mapping, and village-level audits of water supply infrastructure. These sessions also strengthen communication, negotiation, and problem-solving capacities. Tools like a WhatsApp chatbot provide ongoing mobile-based guidance, along with gamified features that sustain motivation. Jal Addas, in-person events, build community belonging, social recognition, and space for sharing experiences.

With these methods, adolescent girls have identified unsafe sources such as damkals and shallow wells, encouraged rainwater harvesting, followed up on stalled pipeline projects, and mobilized others to conserve water and improve sanitation. Their observations, for instance noticing the continued use of drinking water for washing vehicles or the health impacts of iron-contaminated sources, have translated into tangible interventions including awareness drives, poster campaigns, and school-based actions.

The programme also ensures that student-led actions are visible and valued. A digital changemaker portfolio tracks actions and maps it to the leadership skills that they have developed in the journey, encouraging continued effort and peer motivation. Importantly, participation is not framed as volunteerism but as recognition of civic capacity that already exists. The Jaldoot Programme, in this way, shows what becomes possible when girls' everyday experiences are treated as legitimate starting points for systemic action.



Lived Knowledge Based Climate Action:

Girls brought an understanding of how changing rainfall patterns, poor storage systems, and contaminated sources (like iron- and arsenic-affected wells) impacted families' health and routines. This ensured water-related issues were addressed within the wider context of local climate stress—like reduced groundwater reliability or seasonal flooding. Their insights guided feasible, climate-aligned solutions adoptable by the community.



Community-Generated Climate Data:

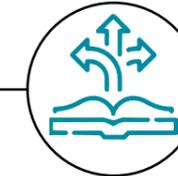
By mapping 2000+ flood-prone zones, tracking seasonal water availability, and testing contamination, youth (with the majority being girls) created decentralized data systems that surfaced early signs of climate stress. In Assam's flood- and drought-affected districts, this intelligence helped communities anticipate risks—like post-monsoon contamination or sudden supply breakdowns—and take preventive action, enabling quicker, ground-up adaptation planning.

Climate-Level Impact

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT



Gender Equality Impact



Reframing Of Girls' Roles And Identities:

The programme created space for girls to be seen—and see themselves—not just as water recipients or household caretakers, but as informed actors shaping public decisions. Their leadership in identifying problems, interacting with officials, and mobilizing community awareness shifted perceptions of what adolescent girls could do. Tasks once considered outside their domain—like auditing infrastructure or negotiating with contractors—became normalized, repositioning girls from passive dependents to visible contributors in civic and environmental spaces.

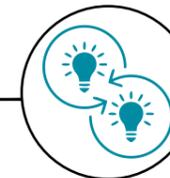
Pathways To Learning And Non-Traditional Roles:

Girls gained access to tools like data collection, digital platforms, and civic action, rarely available to first-generation learners. Exposure to problem-solving, coordination, and public engagement encouraged aspirations beyond traditional roles and participation in forums from school assemblies to panchayat meetings, signaling a deeper change in credibility and agency.



Girls' Leadership Unlocked Wider Engagement:

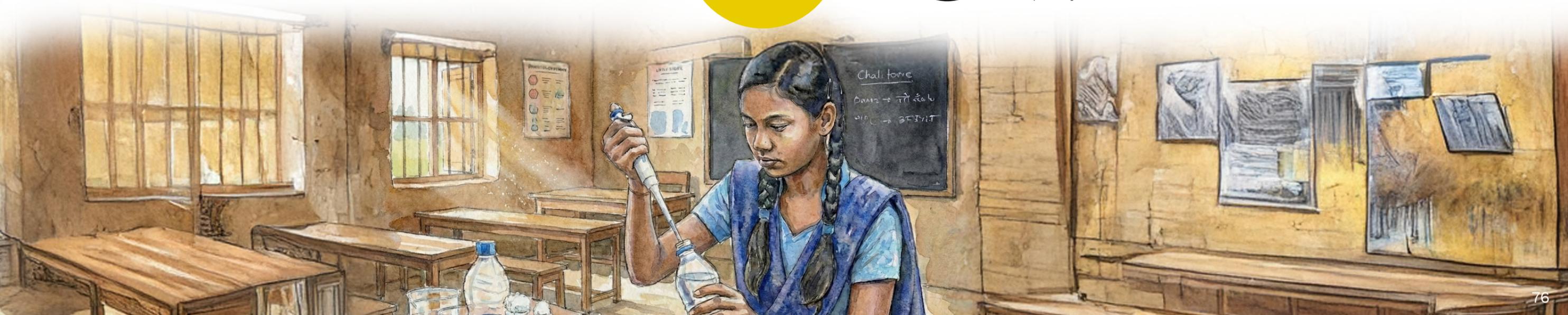
Adolescent girls' visible leadership encouraged broader participation. Women who had never spoken in public meetings began attending Jal Addas (local water dialogues), helping with posters, sharing information, or supporting logistics. The girls' familiarity with local customs, relationships, and dialects made their leadership approachable and trusted.



Bridging Local Knowledge With Institutional Systems:

Girls bridged communities and government systems. Through water audits and household visits, they relayed real-time data—on pipeline delays or unsafe sources—to authorities via the Samaaj Data Portal, sometimes following up with contractors and panchayat heads. This shift from observation to active problem-solving reshaped community-state interactions and perceptions of capability.

Community Level Impact



SUSHMITA DAS

From Learner To Leader

Sushmita Das, a Class 10 student from Bharakhai village in Cachar, Assam, joined the Jaldoot Programme with hesitation but soon emerged as one of its most active participants—eventually being recognized as the Best Jaldoot of Assam by the Chief Minister. Coming from a modest background, with her mother working multiple jobs to support the family, Sushmita led over 66 local actions. She organized water-saving awareness activities in schools, investigated non-functional water supply schemes, and led waste



clean-up drives that removed over 250 kg of waste from her village. She also played a mentoring role, re-engaging less active Jaldoots across districts by organizing peer learning sessions. Her work reflects how young people can drive consistent, community-rooted problem-solving when given the opportunity.

WAY FORWARD

With thousands of adolescents already engaged across Assam, the Jaldoot Programme is now positioned to deepen its long-term impact by focusing on continuity and systemic linkage. Practices already emerging—such as peer-to-peer support through Jaldoot Addas, recognition via leaderboards, and data sharing through the Samaaj Data Portal—offer a strong foundation to build from. Going forward, the focus is shifting toward sustaining engagement between programme phases, enabling active Jaldoots to take on facilitative roles, and strengthening the interface between youth-led insights and local governance. As mentors continue to support and re-energize participants, especially across districts, the programme is gradually evolving into a more decentralized and community-anchored model. Ensuring that these structures are reinforced and connected to decision-making spaces will be key to embedding adolescent leadership in water and climate action over the long term.

Agro Stewards

Women-Led Ecological Resistance In Manipur

Program in Focus: SALT (Sloping Agricultural Land Technology) and FORLIS (Forest Restoration of Locally Important Species) Program

Inception: 2015

Geography: Manipur

Reach: 7 districts

Implementing Organisation: Realm of Nature Based Actions (RNBA)

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices, Gender-Based Violence



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

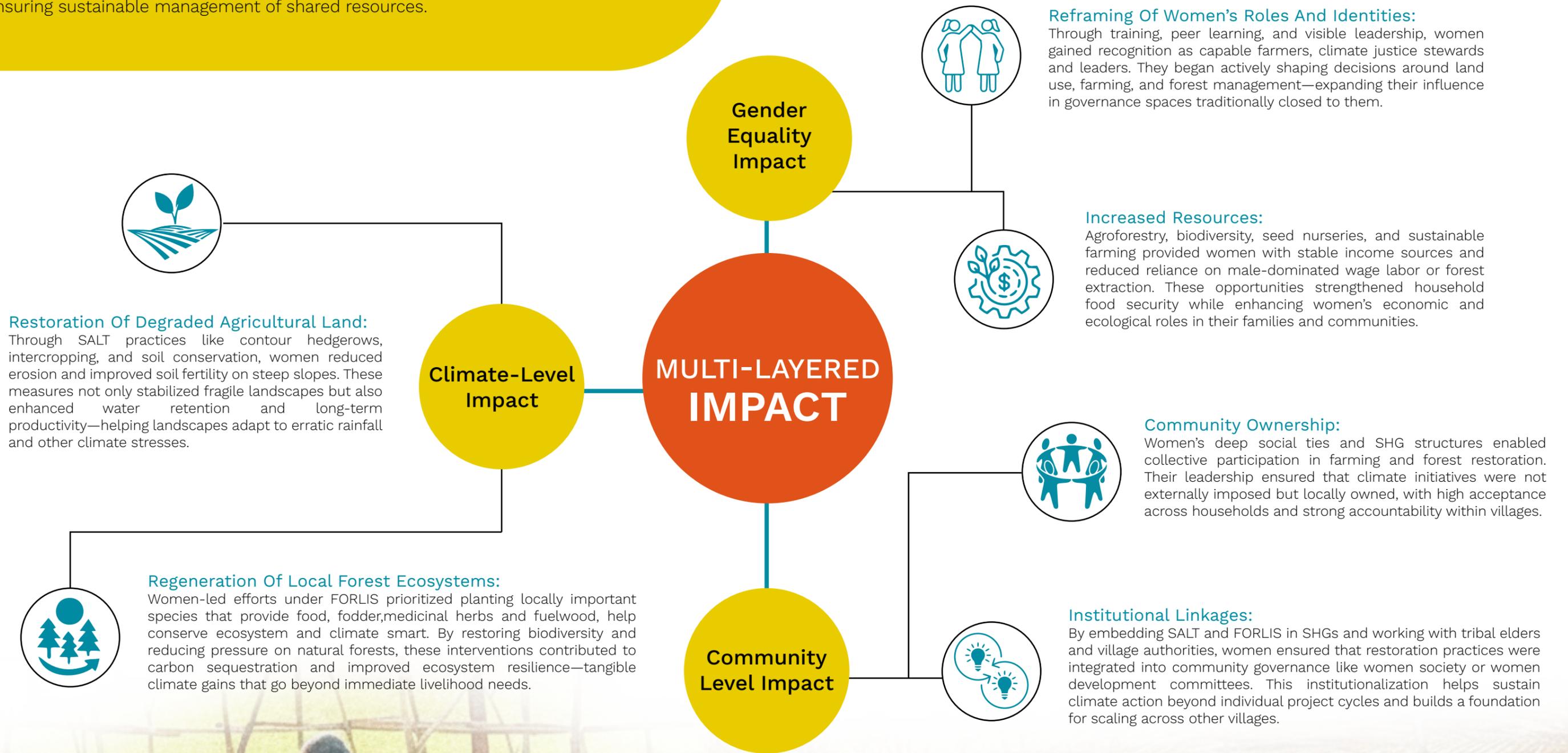
In Manipur's hilly districts, where communities depend heavily on land and forests, women are working with RNBA to restore degraded landscapes while strengthening their economic and decision-making roles.

Through the SALT-FORLIS initiative, women are introducing Sloping Agricultural Land Technology (SALT) to replace shifting cultivation on steep slopes with more permanent farming systems. This includes creating contour hedgerows of nitrogen-fixing plants, practicing intercropping, and using soil-conservation techniques that prevent erosion and improve productivity. Alongside this, the Forest Restoration of Locally Important Species (FORLIS) approach supports women to regenerate nearby forests by planting indigenous species that provide food, fodder, medicinal herbs, and fuelwood, and help conserve ecosystems and promote climate-smart agriculture, reducing pressure on natural forests while meeting household needs.

These interventions are implemented through self-help groups, which provide training, share knowledge across villages, and coordinate collective activities such as nursery development, seed distribution, and plantation. Women farmers are seeing direct benefits including better crop yields, diversified incomes through agroforestry, and more secure access to forest-based resources. By linking ecological restoration with livelihood security, the programme ensures that conservation efforts also strengthen food systems and women's economic agency.

Over time, women's participation in SALT and FORLIS has also created space for them in local governance. Leaders from self-help groups are now engaging with landowners, tribal elders,

and village bodies to influence decisions on land use, forest management, and climate priorities. This shift is gradually embedding women's voices in community decision-making, a crucial step in challenging existing gender hierarchies while ensuring sustainable management of shared resources.



LANDIM BARIAM

A Woman Champion Of SALT In Puichi Village, Manipur

Landim Bariam, a mother of five from Puichi village in Noney district, once depended on shifting cultivation that caused soil erosion and poor yields. After training with RNBA, she adopted Sloping Agricultural Land Technology (SALT) using contour hedgerows, organic composting, and mixed cropping to restore her degraded land. Her farm now produces stable harvests with improved soil fertility and reduced labor.

Landim has mobilized other women to adopt SALT who have been inspired by her success, leading a local movement for climate-smart and sustainable farming. She is now recognized as a woman leader in ecological restoration, showing how women's knowledge and leadership can rebuild both land and livelihoods in Manipur's hill communities.



WAY FORWARD

The way forward focuses on sustaining SALT-FORLIS through local self-help groups and village authorities, ensuring long-term community ownership. In partnership with RNBA, women leaders are seeking alignment with government programs like MSRLM (Manipur State Rural Livelihoods Mission), building collaborations with local NGOs and funders to scale the model across Northeast India. The emphasis is on strengthening indigenous knowledge systems, expanding women's role in climate and gender policy, and embedding culturally rooted approaches to biodiversity conservation—so that restoration efforts remain both community-led and institutionally supported.

Bee Mothers

Women-Led Pollination For Climate Action

Program in Focus: Buzzing for Biodiversity

Inception: 2023

Geography: Karnataka

Reach: 1000 families, 5000 bee boxes

Implementing Organisation: SCODWES
(Sahyadri Community Development &
Women Empowerment Society)

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline &
Unsustainable Practices



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

As primary food producers, knowledge holders, and caretakers of local biodiversity, many rural women in Karnataka already manage the delicate balance between resource use and regeneration. Drawing on this lived expertise, women across the Western Ghats have begun to reclaim space as ecological stewards. The Buzzing for Biodiversity initiative by SCODWES builds on this foundation. The initiative supports women to become 'Bee Mothers', community-based caretakers of bee colonies that enhance natural pollination, improve crop yields, and generate supplementary income through honey and related products.

Women receive five bee boxes each and engage in hands-on training covering sustainable beekeeping, hive care, harvesting, and disease prevention. These technical skills are integrated with modules on financial literacy, marketing, and digital tools, enabling participants to independently manage production and sales. Exposure visits to peer-led apiaries further build networks and confidence. Importantly, the initiative is shaped by the women themselves, beginning with baseline surveys and focus groups to identify their priorities, and co-designing training formats, schedules, and content. This ensures the programme builds on women's existing knowledge and capacities.

Many women have expanded operations, started micro-enterprises, or joined marketing collectives. Women's groups such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) have become spaces for mutual learning, credit access, and collective voice, with some forming linkages to Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs).



Climate-Resilient Agriculture:

Managed bee colonies across biodiversity-sensitive zones boosted pollination, supporting crop productivity even under erratic rainfall and rising temperatures. Farmers reported 15–20% yield increases, especially in pollinator-dependent crops, alongside reduced dependence on synthetic inputs. As bees travel 2–3 km from hives, nearby farms also benefited, stabilizing yields and improving soil health in a region already facing ecosystem stress.



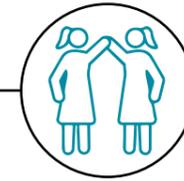
Lived Knowledge Based Climate Action:

Women's deep familiarity with seasonal cycles, local flora, and traditional land-use practices allowed the program to align with ecological rhythms. Bee boxes were placed in optimal locations, and pesticide use was often avoided due to reliance on organic methods, leading to ecologically sound climate action.



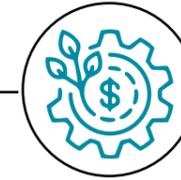
Local Economy Resilience:

Beekeeping introduced a viable, low-investment income stream generating 18,000– 22,000 annually per woman, strengthening village-level value chains and, in some cases, reducing seasonal migration pressures as families found renewed opportunities tied to local biodiversity rather than external labour markets.



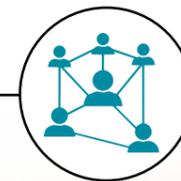
Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

Participation shifted how women saw themselves and how communities viewed them. Many moved beyond domestic roles to become income earners, trainers, and cooperative members. Their leadership in beekeeping challenged norms, and their presence in public forums—exhibitions or marketplace negotiations—redefined women's roles. Over time, they were recognized as knowledge holders, contributing to household and community wellbeing, and gained greater agency over decisions.



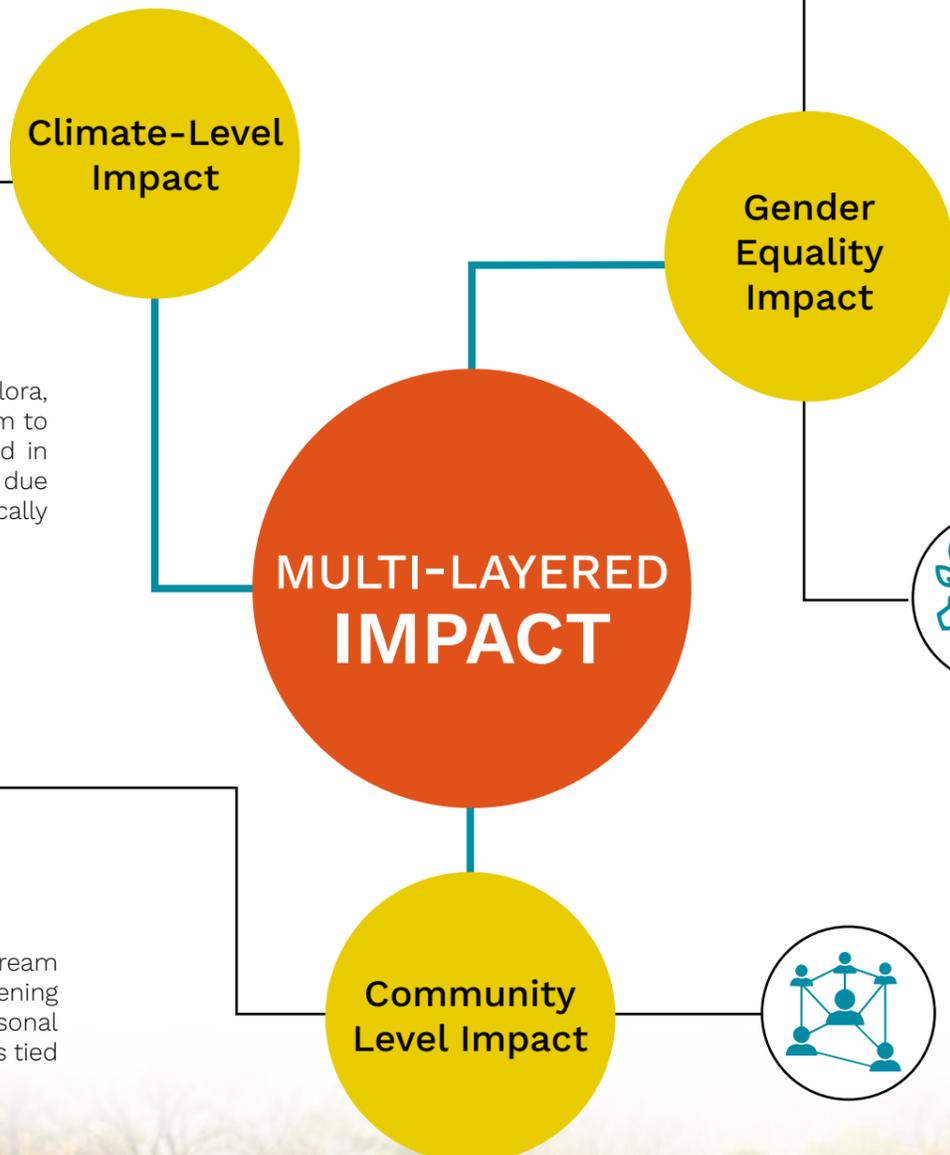
Increase In Resources:

Beekeeping provided a reliable, self-managed income with minimal time investment, enhancing financial agency and granting access to assets, skills, and social capital through SHGs and collectives. Women reinvested in value addition or used savings for household needs, creating a stable foundation for long-term financial security.



Peer Networks Driving Collective Action:

Women supported and mentored each other through SHGs and JLGs. Early adopters became local resource persons, helping normalize beekeeping, sustain engagement, and scale the initiative via word-of-mouth and local demonstration.

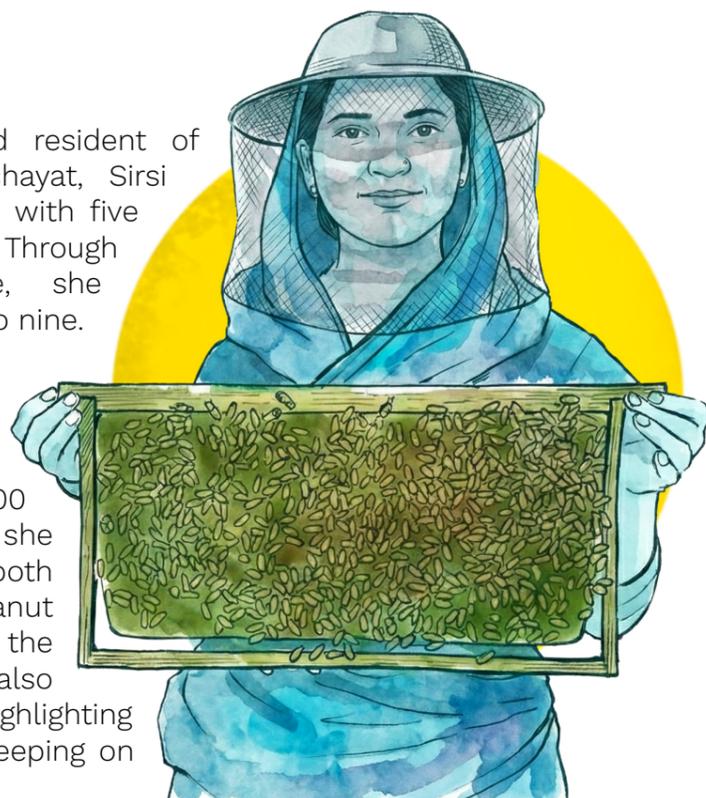


CHAITHRA GANGADHAR MOGER

Building Income And Influence Through Beekeeping

Chaithra Gangadhar Moger, a 32 year old resident of Balegadde village under Ummachagi Panchayat, Sirsi block, Uttara Kannada district, was provided with five bee boxes under the Bee Mothers initiative. Through her commitment and consistent care, she successfully expanded the number of boxes to nine.

During the recent harvest, Chaithra produced around 52 kilograms of honey, which she sold at a price ranging from ₹500 to ₹600 per kilogram, earning an income between ₹26,000 and ₹31,200. In addition to honey production, she observed a notable increase in the yield of both arecanut and black pepper crops. The arecanut yield rose by about one quintal compared to the previous harvest, while the black pepper vines also showed improved flowering and fruit set, highlighting the positive impact of pollination from beekeeping on her farm's overall productivity.



WAY FORWARD

The initiative continues to navigate challenges like pesticide drift from nearby farms, monsoon-related hive damage, and social restrictions on women. These were addressed through community awareness on organic farming alongside beekeeping, specialised training on seasonal hive care, and peer-led confidence building. Looking ahead, SCODWES aims to scale the initiative by placing 25 lakh bee boxes across the Western Ghats—of which 12 lakh will be distributed initially and the remaining boxes are expected to be added by the women themselves as bee colonies multiply—reaching 2–2.4 lakh women or families across four states. Plans include establishing 100+ women-led FPOs, developing Sacred Bee Zones (ecologically protected areas linked to temple ecosystems and forest traditions, where GI-tagged honey can be produced), strengthening local value chains, and advocating for pollination-linked rural employment as a core strategy for climate resilience and women's economic empowerment.

When Water Returns

Gender-Just Revival Of Bundelkhand's Tanks

Program in Focus: BIWAL – Bundelkhand Initiative for Water, Agriculture and Livelihoods

Inception: 2019

Geography: Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh

Reach: 20 blocks, 585 villages, 100,533 farmers

Implementing Organisation: SRIJAN (Self-Reliant Initiatives through Joint Action)

Context Theme(s): Water Governance & Security, Climate-induced Migration



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

In response to the growing issue of water scarcity in Bundelkhand, women are leading efforts to find local solutions with the support of SRIJAN. Under the BIWAL initiative, women across villages in Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh, and Niwari in Madhya Pradesh, and Chitrakoot, Mahoba, Hamirpur, and Lalitpur in Uttar Pradesh, have mobilized around the rehabilitation of centuries-old water tanks, desilting them, repairing embankments, and restoring catchments. These efforts are not only bringing back reliable sources of water for irrigation and livestock but also enabling the return of traditional farming practices, such as water chestnut cultivation and multi-layer farming. In many places, people who once migrated to Delhi for work are now staying, growing crops, and investing in their children's futures.

Women have taken on leadership roles in tank management, agricultural planning, and community outreach. Their long-standing struggles with water access make them uniquely positioned to manage these systems effectively. At the heart of BIWAL's strategy are Community Tank Management Committees (TMCs), where women make up at least 50% of the members. These platforms recognize and formalize women's critical role in managing water resources, drawing on their lived experience and local knowledge. The committees oversee water budgeting, infrastructure maintenance, and financial decisions. With support from SRIJAN through information access, capacity building, and devolution of control, women are actively making decisions about water use and conservation. Regular TMC meetings ensure that issues are identified and addressed locally.

The restored tanks have created a foundation for climate-resilient livelihoods. More reliable irrigation has reduced dependence on erratic rainfall, enabled crop diversification, improved soil health, and supported kitchen gardens, strengthening food security and reducing distress migration.

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT



Climate-Level Impact

Community Level Impact

Gender Equality Impact

Improved Water Security And Groundwater Recharge:

Erratic rainfall and over-extraction of groundwater had severely affected land productivity in the region. As a result, farmers had begun to rely heavily on chemical inputs and exploit groundwater to meet food and income needs. Tank restoration under the initiative reversed this trend by significantly increasing rainwater harvesting and soil water retention capacity. In Niwari district, a study of 148 respondents across 9 villages showed a measurable rise in groundwater levels, with shallow wells within a 500–1000 meter radius of tanks showing accelerated recharge. Where wells previously dried up by February or March, they now retain water until May. Pumping durations also increased—from just 0.5 hours per day earlier to 1.5–2.5 hours post-restoration. Water levels in wells rose by over 5 feet, enabling farmers to grow water-dependent crops like peanuts, urad, and soybean.

Community Ownership:

The tank revival initiative has catalyzed a strong sense of collective ownership within the community, grounded in cultural memory and ancestral pride. Many farmers contributed substantial labour and resources—some deploying up to 100 tractor trolleys for desilting their fields—working day and night without external prompting. The community perceives tank restoration as a sacred duty, not merely a development project. This deep-rooted sense of responsibility is reflected in the contribution ratio: over 70% of the inputs—be it labour, materials, or logistical support—have come directly from the community, with SRIJAN's contribution limited to around 30%. Rather than being passive beneficiaries, community members are proactive stakeholders who lead implementation, monitor progress, and make demands to ensure long-term functionality of the tanks.

Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

The BIWAL initiative has contributed to a gradual but meaningful shift in gender norms in Bundelkhand, where women traditionally faced strict restrictions on mobility and public presence. Initially, women's participation in community meetings was minimal—even silent—due to discomfort sharing space with men. However, consistent engagement through repeated meetings has led to a visible transformation: women now not only attend meetings regularly but also encourage others to join. This increased presence has helped women renegotiate their roles both within the household and the community, marking a significant step toward gender-inclusive decision-making in rural governance.

Restoration Of Soil Health And Expansion Of Cultivable Area:

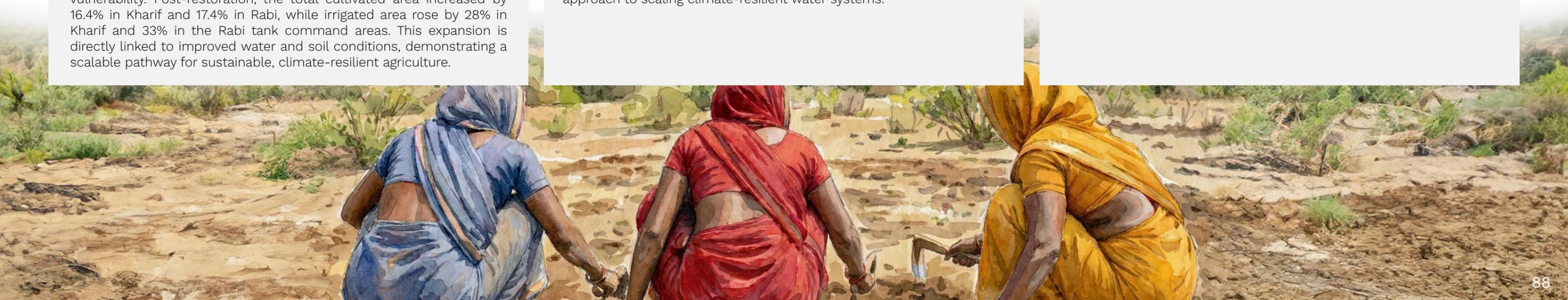
Tanks restored under the program provided not just water, but also nutrient-rich silt used by farmers to replenish topsoil—a crucial intervention in a region facing erosion, degraded soils, and declining fertility. Applying this silt has improved the soil profile and helped reduce dependency on synthetic fertilisers, thereby also rebuilding soil carbon stores. This has allowed communities to increase food production without expanding agricultural land. The program has promoted climate-smart agriculture—including crop diversification, better soil management, and improved seed use—to reduce climate vulnerability. Post-restoration, the total cultivated area increased by 16.4% in Kharif and 17.4% in Rabi, while irrigated area rose by 28% in Kharif and 33% in the Rabi tank command areas. This expansion is directly linked to improved water and soil conditions, demonstrating a scalable pathway for sustainable, climate-resilient agriculture.

Strengthening Community Identity Through Shared Water Heritage:

The revival efforts are not only community-owned but also built upon the region's traditional ecological knowledge of water conservation and land management. The belief that these tanks are part of a living legacy has become a unifying narrative, with people actively saying that they will not let the tanks disappear. This has enabled the program to scale organically across villages, with minimal financial input. The collective action model, rooted in local values and practices, ensures that replication doesn't require heavy external investment. Instead, it builds on legacy and trust, making it a cost-effective and culturally resonant approach to scaling climate-resilient water systems.

Reduction In Drudgery And Increase In Confidence And Autonomy:

The restoration of water tanks has significantly reduced the physical burden on women, who previously spent an average of 2.5 hours a day fetching water. With water now available closer to home, women have more time and energy to participate in livelihood activities, community forums, and their children's education. Many women have reported an increase in confidence and self-worth as a result of their association with the initiative. By reducing drudgery and creating space for agency, the program has enabled women to engage more actively in shaping their environment and future.



MANJU PRAJAPATI

Championing Water and Agricultural Resilience

The pond in Manju's village would dry up by February, limiting irrigation and reducing crop yields. In 2019, through the BIWAL project, she led efforts to deepen the pond, ensuring water year-round. This allowed her to irrigate wheat, use the pond's fertile soil to enrich fields, and inspire neighbors to adopt similar practices. She also supported the construction of check structures and dams, improving water retention in canals and wells. Today, three villages rely on the pond for irrigation, roaming animals have water year-round, and many households have started orchards. Manju's conviction and persistence have turned a seasonal pond into a lasting source of agricultural and ecological resilience.



WAY FORWARD

The BIWAL initiative plans to expand its community-driven model to other water ecosystems, combining physical restoration with strong social and institutional mechanisms. Learning from past tank revival failures, the programme focuses on strengthening village-level Tank Management Committees (TMCs), which will oversee planning, desiltation, maintenance, and stakeholder coordination. These committees will be trained in technical processes, safety, financial planning, and water governance, and will work closely with Gram Sabhas and Panchayati Raj Institutions to ensure participatory decision-making. Financial sustainability will rely on government funding, local contributions, and revenue streams like user fees. Monitoring systems and structured documentation of learnings and practices will support future replication, allowing other communities and stakeholders to adapt the model in their own contexts.

The Lakekeepers

Women-Led Revival Of Fisheries

Program in Focus: Community Based Aquatic Habitat Restoration and Fisheries Development

Inception: 2022

Geography: Maharashtra

Reach: 27 Gram Sabhas across Gadchiroli District

Implementing Organisation: SRISHTI (Society for Rural Initiative In Sustainable & Holistic Themes in India)

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Shankarpur, a forest-edge village in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, has seen its community-managed lakes and fisheries (once the backbone of nutrition and income) come under stress from deforestation, erratic rainfall, and the introduction of non-native fish species. As lake health declined and local livelihoods weakened, women, long excluded from fisheries governance despite their central role in household resilience, began stepping forward to shape new responses.

They organized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which became the foundation for both ecological and livelihood restoration. Through these groups, and with facilitation support from SRISHTI, women led the adoption of sustainable aquaculture practices, such as bamboo-based cage culture, an environmentally friendly and locally adaptable technique that supported both food security and income generation. The SHGs also strengthened women's financial agency, with members managing records, pooling savings, and handling negotiations with buyers and local actors. This shift positioned them not merely as contributors to the household economy, but as leaders in community resource management.

Their leadership extended to governance systems as well. Women engaged directly with the Forest Department to obtain permissions for lake management under the Community Forest Rights (CFR) framework, ensuring that their efforts were anchored in legal recognition and strengthened community ownership of resources. At the same time, focus group discussions created space for women and community members to reflect on ecological changes: depleting water levels, disappearing plant species, and new wildlife pressures, and link these shifts to their everyday needs, reinforcing the connection between climate realities and community action.

Recognizing that long-term change required broad participation, women, with SRISHTI's support, also initiated separate dialogues with men in the community. These conversations helped foster trust, reduce resistance, and create a sense of shared purpose, embedding women's leadership within the collective vision for Shankarpur's future.



Sustainable Resource Use:

Women-led SHGs introduced rules for seasonal fishing, restricted overfishing, and ensured regular monitoring and record-keeping. These measures protected fish populations, revived lake ecosystems, and created a balance between meeting livelihoods and sustaining resources for future generations.



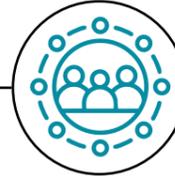
Ecological Reflection And Adaptation:

Through focus group discussions, women consistently reflected on environmental changes—such as receding lake levels, disappearing aquatic plants, and new pressures from wildlife. By linking these shifts to their community's daily realities, they ensured that ecological restoration was not an abstract idea but a lived practice rooted in adaptive management.



MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Community Level Impact



Collective Approach:

Women's ability to form and sustain Self-Help Groups (SHGs) was central to the program's success. These groups fostered collaboration, pooled knowledge, and shared responsibility, ensuring that lake management was not dependent on individuals but held collectively by the community.



Community Ownership:

Women became trusted negotiators with the Forest Department, local institutions, and community members. Their empathy-driven leadership helped overcome resistance, build consensus, and secure buy-in from men and other stakeholders—turning sustainability into a shared village mandate rather than an external intervention.

Climate-Level Impact

Gender Equality Impact



Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

The program enabled women to move beyond their traditional identities as homemakers and unpaid labor to become recognized leaders in community governance and economic decision-making. Their active participation in Gram Sabha meetings, management of SHG finances, and negotiation with external institutions reframed them as decision-makers and resource stewards. This visible shift not only gave them greater influence within the household and community but also redefined how women's contributions are valued in public and ecological life.



Challenging Social Resistance:

The shift of women into public and financial leadership initially faced resistance from men, who felt threatened by this change in traditional roles. By creating separate dialogue spaces with men and highlighting women's organizational and financial strengths, the program was able to build broader acceptance. This process not only enabled women's leadership to take root but also began to shift entrenched gender norms within the community.

ANUSAYA HIRAJI PADA

Guarding the Ponds, Securing the Future

After losing her husband, Anusaya supported her children by working as a daily labourer. Life changed when her village secured forest rights and formed the Community Forest Rights Management Committee (CFRMC). As a member, she and other women began managing local water bodies collectively—introducing seasonal fishing rules, monitoring ponds, and patrolling against theft. Through these women-led fishery efforts, Anusaya earned 20,000 in a year, which she used to repair her home and fund her children's education. No longer dependent on outside labour, she now sees herself as a decision-maker and steward of the village's ponds. For Anusaya, leadership has brought both dignity and a secure future for her family and community.



WAY FORWARD

With the lake now governed under Gram Sabha rights, and women's SHGs firmly at the helm, the program is designed for sustainability. The success in 27 Gram Sabhas offers a compelling blueprint that could scale across forested districts where community livelihoods and ecological futures are intertwined. Future goals include scaling SHG-based fisheries microfinance & expanding bamboo cage culture practices and deepening ecological restoration efforts. With women at the helm of ecological and economic restoration, Srishti's work in Gadchiroli offers a powerful model for how rural communities can respond to climate change.

Rooted Resilience

Women Leading Climate Action In Odisha's Tribal Heartland

Program in Focus: Collectivizing Girls and Young Women to Lead Climate Action

Inception: 2024

Geography: Odisha

Reach: 600 tribal and Dalit women across 33 villages in 1 district

Implementing Organisation: Samajik Seva Sadan (SSS)

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

In Sundargarh's tribal heartland, women have long borne the heaviest burden of ecological stress, walking farther for water, farming on depleted soils, and navigating unsafe forests for fuel and produce. In partnership with Samajik Seva Sadan (SSS), women's collectives are turning this struggle into leadership, anchoring community-driven models of climate resilience.

Women's groups like Archita SHG have led the revival of organic farming by producing bio-manure and natural pesticides from local resources. With more than 300 compost pits now functional, farming has become less dependent on costly chemicals while agricultural waste is being transformed into an asset.

Equally powerful has been the return to indigenous farming wisdom. Women have revived traditional seed varieties, built community seed banks, and diversified cultivation with climate-resilient crops such as millets, mustard, and onions. This has strengthened food security, restored soil fertility, and rekindled pride in ancestral practices once on the verge of being forgotten.

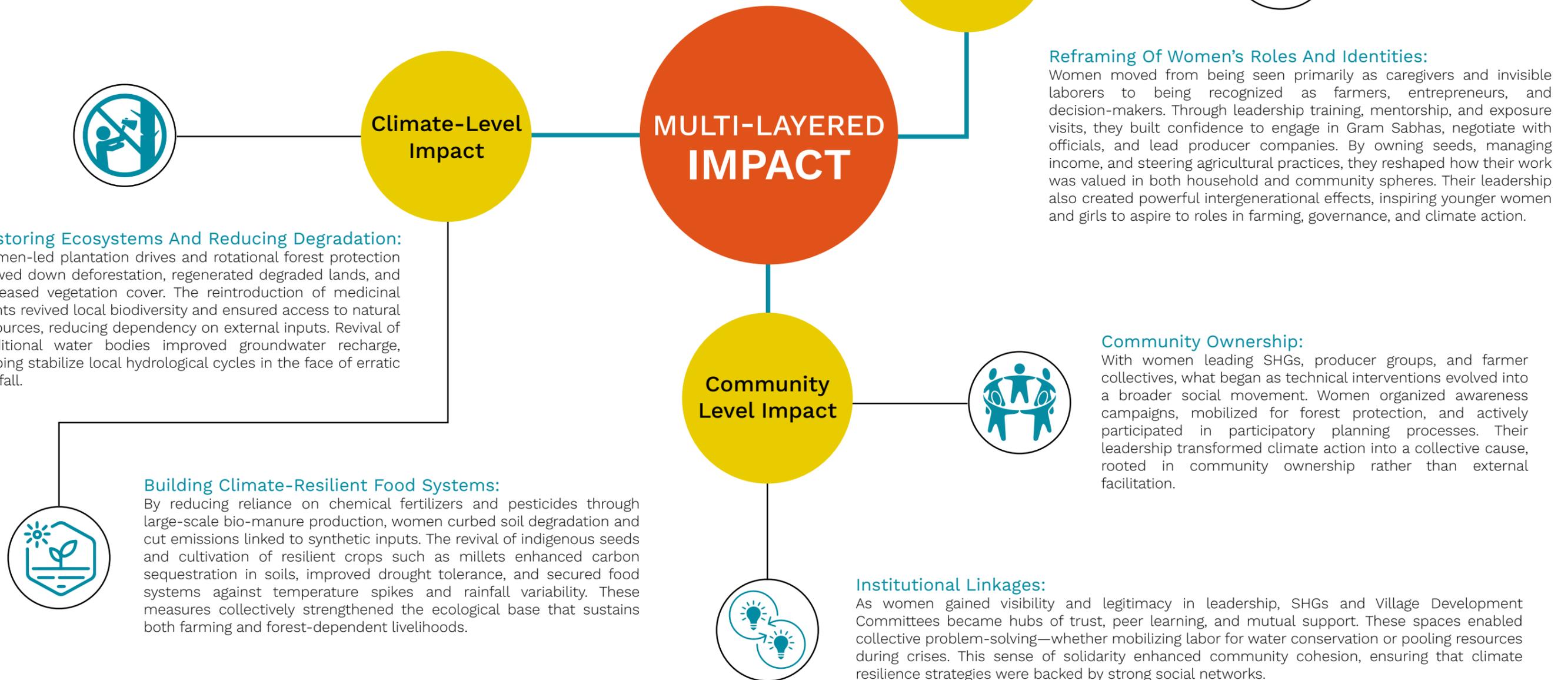
Beyond agriculture, women are also leading efforts to restore degraded ecosystems. Through tree plantation drives and the reintroduction of medicinal plants, they are regenerating forests, reviving tribal habitats, and reconnecting communities with traditional knowledge of nutrition and healing.

Their leadership extends to infrastructure and institutions as well. Women have built compost

pits and water conservation structures, while a women-led Farmer Producer Company (WFPC) has been established to support collective marketing, aggregation, and better incomes. Managed entirely by a trained board of women leaders, the WFPC reflects a shift from subsistence to self-determined enterprise.

A strong pipeline of local women leaders is also taking shape. Through SHGs, Village Development Committees, and regular training, women are drafting resolutions, participating in planning meetings, and engaging directly with local officials, roles once closed off to them.

Finally, demonstration farms, farm schools, and exposure visits have given women both technical knowledge and visibility. By sharing their practices, strengthening market linkages, and inspiring replication across villages, they are not only reshaping agriculture but also standing as role models for others.



BIBIYANA KULLU

From Farmer to Leader

Mrs. Bibiyana Kullu, a small farmer from Saleghagra village, has become a driving force for climate-resilient farming in her community. With support from Samajik Seva Sadan (SSS), she shifted from chemical-based methods to organic practices, preparing bio-fertilizers like Jeevamrut and natural pest repellents from traditional materials. Renovating her cowshed ensured a steady supply of inputs, enabling her to successfully cultivate vegetables on half an acre with improved soil fertility and crop health. Her visible success not only reduced costs and restored ecological balance but also inspired fellow farmers to adopt sustainable practices. By leading through example, Bibiyana has shown how women farmers can champion low-cost, eco-friendly solutions that build resilience for the whole community.



WAY FORWARD

The way forward builds on women's leadership, with Samajik Seva Sadan (SSS) continuing to strengthen and institutionalize women-led collectives such as SHGs, Farmer Producer Companies, and federations as hubs for leadership, knowledge-sharing, and resources. It involves expanding trained Community Resource Persons (CRPs) through peer learning and exposure visits to replicate successful models across vulnerable blocks and districts. Integration with government programs like NRLM and Shree Anna Abhiyan, community-led seed banks, and composting units are expected to sustain momentum. Engaging men and local influencers and advocating for policy recognition is critical. Finally, women-led demonstrations of solar panels, smokeless chulhas, plantation, and agroforestry can accelerate the adoption of climate-smart practices, anchoring them in local realities while pushing for their integration into wider development plans.

Visible & Valued

Women Transforming Waste Management In Pune

Program in Focus: At-Source Wet Waste Management Initiative

Inception: 2018

Geography: Maharashtra

Reach: 175+ trained women, 23,000+ kg of wet waste managed in 295+ decentralised composting sites

Implementing Organisation: SWaCH Pune Seva Cooperative

Context Theme(s): Waste Management



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Women waste pickers, long excluded from formal systems, have led the charge in decentralized wet waste management, turning their knowledge and labour into valued public services. Through SWaCH, they've built on their expertise to operate composting pits, manage modular biogas units, and educate communities, redefining their role from invisible workers to frontline environmental stewards.

To support this shift, the program promotes decentralized, low-tech solutions that work in space-constrained urban settings. Simple systems like pit composting, trays, and modular biogas units are tailored to the available infrastructure, requiring minimal upkeep, no chemicals, and no complex machinery. This makes it possible to scale at-source composting across a wide range of residential and institutional sites.

Women waste pickers are trained not just in operations, but also in managing user payments and community engagement. With increased responsibilities, visibility, and average earnings rising by ₹3,800 per month for an average of 1 hour of work, they are now seen as skilled climate workers with an essential role in urban sustainability. Adoption is driven by community ownership rather than top-down enforcement—model neighbourhoods serve as inspiration, and hands-on exposure helps dispel common fears about smell, space, or maintenance.

The impact is tangible. Over 23,000 kg of wet waste is processed at source daily, reducing methane emissions and transport-related pollution, while saving Pune's municipal system more than ₹2.3 crore each year. Many of the participating residential complexes and institutions qualify as Bulk Waste Generators (BWGs), defined as entities generating over 100

kg of waste per day. A compliance-monitoring system piloted by SWaCH, in collaboration with the Pune Municipal Corporation, tracks performance through routine spot-checks. This ensures that BWGs uphold the city's waste management by-laws, aligning community-led action with broader governance and climate goals.



Reduced High Carbon Waste Infrastructure:

By enabling wet waste to be processed on-site—through composting pits and modular biogas units—women waste pickers reduce the need for daily municipal collection and long-haul transport. This cuts fuel use, traffic congestion, and air pollution. Localized treatment avoids unnecessary GHG emissions and allows residential and institutional sites to become self-contained climate action units.



Climate-Level Impact

Lower Methane Emissions From Organic Waste:

In landfills, organic waste decomposes without oxygen and releases methane—a greenhouse gas over 80 times more potent than CO₂ in the short term. Composting and biomethanation stop this release at the source, while transforming a major pollution driver into a climate solution that also produces compost or clean energy.

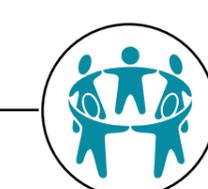


Community Level Impact



Collaborative Civic Engagement:

Women waste pickers didn't just manage waste—they built relationships. Their presence in residential societies fostered trust, dialogue, and accountability. By engaging directly with households, attending society meetings, and co-developing systems, they shifted the dynamic from service delivery to shared stewardship. This participatory approach helped residents take ownership of waste segregation and composting. Over time, several of these sites evolved into “model communities”, hosting exposure visits for others, and inspiring citywide adoption. Through this, the program seeded a culture of everyday environmental responsibility.



Shifted Perception Of Waste Work:

Historically seen as “dirty” or marginal, waste work gained legitimacy and respect through the visible leadership of women waste pickers. As trained compost managers, biogas operators, and educators, these women became recognised service providers in their communities. Their regular interactions with residents helped challenge deep-rooted stigma. They weren't just “collectors,” but experts in systems that kept neighbourhoods clean and climate-friendly. This shift was reinforced by public recognition—some societies even felicitated their workers during community events. The result: increased dignity, reduced discrimination, and a more inclusive view of who shapes urban sustainability.

MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT



Reframing Of Women's Roles And Identities:

Women's consistent presence in residential complexes, participation in meetings, and technical roles in maintaining waste infrastructure positioned them as visible public service providers. Many women now negotiate contracts, host exposure visits, and represent their work in public forums, transitioning to being environmental educators. This reframing has also influenced how their families and neighbours perceive them—leading to greater respect at home and in society.

Gender Equality Impact



Increase In Resources:

Managing wet waste systems has opened up new, stable income streams—women have increased their monthly earnings by an average of ₹3,800 for one hour's work. Paid directly by residents, this work offers greater financial security and increases the sustainability of precarious scrap based livelihoods. With this increased and consistent income, women have secured more confidence to take up space in key household financial decisions as well.

PALLAVI KADAM

Leading By Doing

Pallavi Kadam, a long-time dry waste worker, expanded her skills through SWaCH's composting program and is now a trained organic waste service provider. Taking on responsibilities like compost pit maintenance and community education, she has become a visible face of sustainable change in her neighborhood. The transition has provided her not only with additional income but also a renewed sense of purpose and pride. Her role now involves interacting directly with citizens, explaining waste segregation, and ensuring smooth operations—tasks once unthinkable in her earlier, invisible role. Her journey reflects the broader shift the program enables: moving from marginalization to leadership, from survival to sustainability.



WAY FORWARD

Many residential societies remain hesitant to adopt at-source composting due to concerns about smell, space, and maintenance, requiring ongoing dialogue and proof of success. Some women waste pickers, especially from marginalized backgrounds, face social stigma, family resistance, or reluctance to handle organic waste. Formalizing their roles and securing regular payments is a slow, negotiated process. To scale impact, SWaCH plans to expand across all eligible Bulk Waste Generators in Pune and create “lighthouse communities”—model housing societies with successful composting systems that serve as live demonstration and training sites for citizens, building managers, and municipal staff. These communities build trust and show others how systems can work. SWaCH also advocates for stronger enforcement of waste rules, broader recognition of women waste pickers, and a potential citywide cooperative to support training, infrastructure, and women’s participation.

Cultivating Agency

Women Farmers Leading Sustainable Livelihoods In Odisha

Program in Focus: Climate-Resilient Livelihoods Program

Inception: 2014

Geography: Odisha

Reach: 12,000+ tribal farmers, across 300+ villages

Implementing Organisation: VIEWS (Voluntary Integration for Education and Welfare of Society)

Context Theme(s): Agricultural Decline & Unsustainable Practices, Climate-Induced Migration



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Agriculture is the backbone of rural livelihoods in southern Odisha’s tribal regions. Yet this lifeline is under strain. Small and marginal farmers, dependent on uncertain rain-fed systems, grapple with climate change, frequent cyclones, and migration-driven labor shortages. As farming becomes increasingly women-led, their contributions—though vital—are often overlooked. In partnership with VIEWS Odisha, women farmers are changing this narrative by stepping into roles as planners, knowledge-holders, and leaders in agriculture.

One of the most significant shifts has come through the use of Household Livelihood Cards. By recording details on landholding, income, cropping patterns, water access, and seasonal needs, women design crop plans suited to their realities and track outcomes over time. This data-driven approach positions them not as invisible laborers but as recognized managers of household food security and productivity.

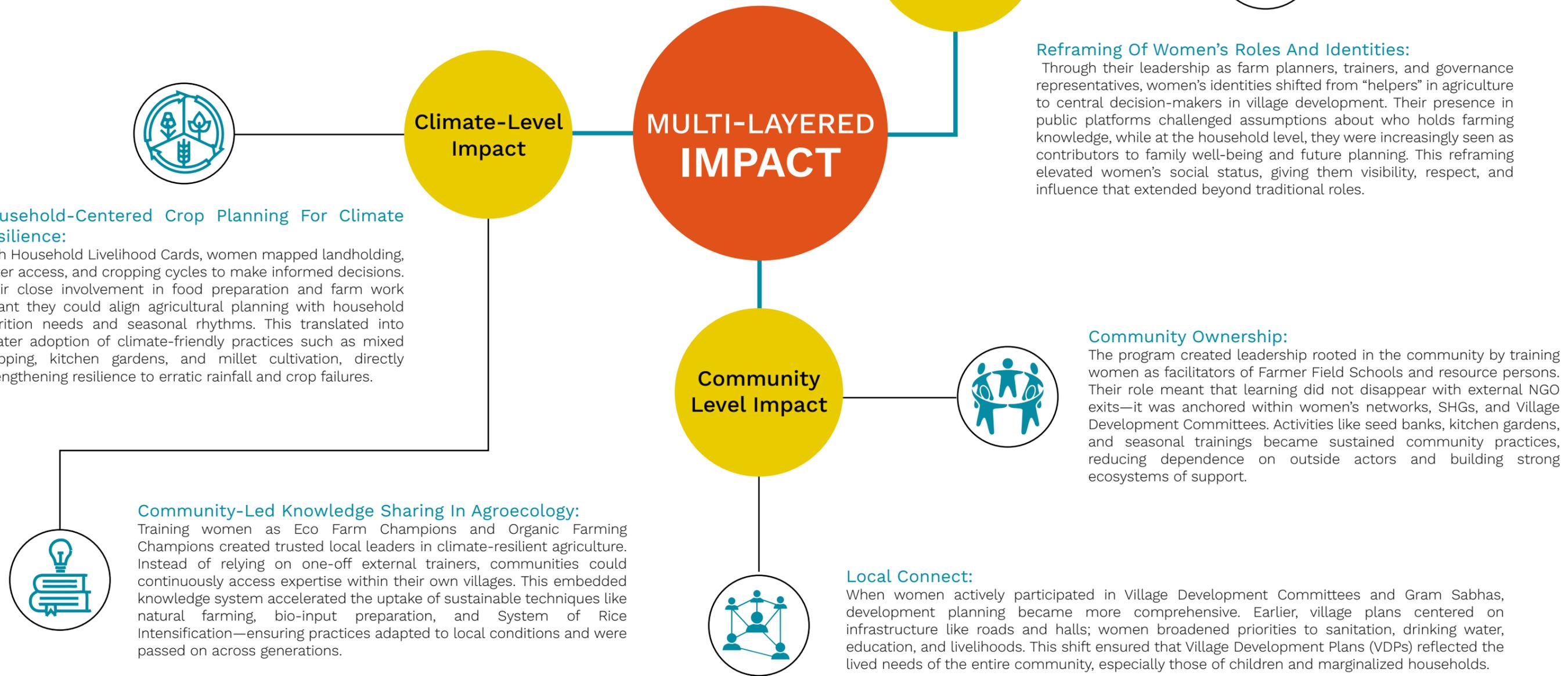
Across villages, Farmer Field Schools—community-based demonstration plots—have become spaces for women to experiment with climate-resilient practices such as System of Rice Intensification, millet cultivation, and mixed cropping. These schools foster peer-to-peer learning, enabling women to share experiences, exchange ideas, and collectively revive traditional agricultural wisdom. Training on natural and organic farming deepens this process: seasonally aligned SARA (Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Advancement) modules equip women to prepare bio-inputs, select resilient seeds, and manage harvest cycles, reinforcing their everyday role as custodians of the land.

Local leadership has also taken root. Villages nominate Eco Farm Champions and Community Resource Persons—women who guide and mentor peers in agroecological techniques. This

distributed leadership ensures knowledge remains embedded within women's networks, reducing dependence on external actors and strengthening resilience from within.

Finally, women are extending their influence beyond farms into village governance. Through Amogha Yojana, a participatory planning tool that helps communities map and prioritize needs, women contribute directly to Village Development Plans. Their involvement ensures that sanitation, nutrition, education, and livelihood security reflect lived realities rather than externally imposed agendas.

Together, these efforts are reimagining women's place in agriculture. With VIEWS Odisha as a partner, women are emerging not just as cultivators but as strategic decision-makers driving resilience in their households and communities.



RAJANI SABARA

Claiming Agency Through Sustainable Farming



Rajani Sabara from Haripur village transformed her livelihood by making deliberate, informed choices in her farming practice after joining the VIEWS sustainable agriculture initiative in 2021. Starting cautiously, she tested new methods on just 0.66 acres of paddy, assessed the results herself, and expanded only after seeing healthier crops and improved yields. She now cultivates paddy, millets, and vegetables using organic inputs and improved techniques, reducing costs and increasing income, including ₹26,000 from vegetable sales alone. Recognised as a progressive farmer, Rajani actively inspires other women to adopt sustainable practices, demonstrating how women's decision-making, confidence, and leadership can drive resilient livelihoods and secure futures for their families.

WAY FORWARD

The way forward lies in deepening women's leadership and community capacity so that resilience is sustained beyond external facilitation. Women's Self-Help Groups, Village Development Committees, Eco Farm Champions, and Community Resource Persons are being nurtured to operate independently, ensuring that knowledge and decision-making remain embedded within the community. Farmer Field Schools and Community Seed Banks in every village will act as decentralized hubs for learning, resource sharing, and seed preservation, reducing input costs and strengthening ownership of sustainable practices. Women are also beginning to shape markets and policy linkages—such as through a tribal women-led Farmer Producer Company in Ganjam, which combines business training with access to inputs and will soon be replicated across districts. Regular engagement with government systems and the use of community-prepared Village Development Plans enable women to unlock resources and influence development priorities, ensuring that women-led action continues to be institutionalised.

The Paryavaran Sakhis

Women-Led Change In Solid Waste Management

Program in Focus: Paryavaran Sakhi

Inception: 2021

Geography: Uttarakhand

Reach: 9 Panchayats (Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve and Garjiya Temple), 25+ Paryavaran Sakhis

Implementing Organisation: Waste Warriors Society

Context Theme(s): Waste Management



WOMEN-LED CLIMATE ACTION

Once agriculture-driven, the Corbett Tiger Reserve region now relies on tourism, drawing 3.4 lakh visitors and ₹23 crore in 2023–24. But this shift, coupled with rising consumerism and urban spillover, has created a mounting waste crisis: plastics choking rivers, being openly burned, and deepening caste-based stigmas around waste work. Women bear the heaviest burden, managing household waste, securing water and food amid climate stress, and coping with environmental hazards, largely without recognition or support from public systems.

It is local women who are stepping up to lead change from within their communities. Instead of treating waste as a stigmatised problem, the women engaged in the Paryavaran Sakhi program of Waste Warriors take charge of local waste systems; carrying out door-to-door dry waste collection, running waste banks, segregating and selling recyclables, and directly engaging with community members to build awareness.

Through Chai pe Charcha (informal tea discussions) space is opened up for conversations not just about waste, but about everyday struggles and aspirations, leading to deepened engagement and a sense of solidarity within Waste Warriors.

From film screenings and upcycling art (including life-sized tigers made of plastic waste) to menstrual hygiene campaigns and exposure visits to waste banks, the outreach efforts are rooted in creativity and respect for local knowledge. The Sakhis also created incentives for community participation by publicly recognising the contributions of households who actively segregated their waste. These platforms help build a sense of ownership and pride among residents, encouraging more households to actively participate in waste segregation and view the Sakhis not as collectors, but as environmental stewards.

The Sakhis themselves have grown into powerful change agents, learning to operate vehicles, manage finances, and maintain digital records on tablets. They present their work to government departments, speak in public forums and meetings, address challenges of waste management, and share their solutions. The Waste Warriors team also holds open discussions with the women, helping them build confidence and recognize their own strength and value, in ways that intersect with their existing social identities of caste and class. distributed leadership ensures knowledge remains embedded within women's networks, reducing dependence on external actors and strengthening resilience from within.



Reduced Stigma Around Waste Work:

By visibly and confidently taking on roles in waste collection, segregation, and public advocacy, women from diverse caste and class backgrounds challenged deep-rooted social stigmas associated with waste. While women from marginalized communities often face invisibilization in such roles, those from dominant caste backgrounds encounter a different barrier—the perception within their families and communities that waste work is ‘dirty’ and socially unacceptable. The program addressed this through sustained dialogue and trust-building, helping shift mindsets over time. Through their leadership, the Sakhis collectively reframed waste work as dignified, skilled, and essential to community wellbeing—fostering broader respect and acceptance across social boundaries.



Collective Ownership Through Trust-Based Leadership:

Women's leadership transformed waste from a stigmatised, invisible chore into a shared community responsibility. Drawing on trust, emotional intelligence, and strong social networks, the Sakhis engaged households through informal conversations and consistent presence. This helped build local ownership over waste systems and significantly increased household participation in segregation and responsible disposal.

Community Level Impact

Climate-Level Impact

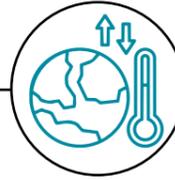
MULTI-LAYERED IMPACT

Gender Equality Impact



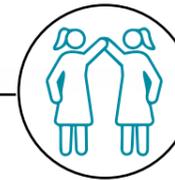
Waste Diversion From Landfills:

The initiative successfully diverted 40.7 metric tonnes of waste from landfills in FY 2024–25, by enabling systematic collection, segregation, and recycling through local waste banks. Women's efforts are leading to a significant reduction in the volume of unmanaged waste entering ecologically sensitive areas, which is helping avoid 2.85 metric tonnes of carbon emissions and 1.1 metric tonnes of methane emissions—directly contributing to improved air quality and reduced climate impact in the region.



Local Climate-Positive Behaviour Change:

By embedding waste management into daily routines and community norms, the initiative encouraged sustained climate-positive behaviour at the household level. Practices like waste segregation, reduction of open burning, and responsible disposal gained traction—not through enforcement, but through trust-based, peer-led engagement led by women. This behavioural shift forms a foundation for long-term environmental resilience in the region.



Reframing Of women's roles And identities:

Participation in the program enabled women to move beyond traditional domestic roles and be recognized as environmental leaders and community problem-solvers. As their confidence and visibility grew—both locally and nationally—many began engaging more actively in village-level governance, including panchayat meetings and development committees. This shift marked a powerful step toward greater public and political agency for women in the region.



Increase In resources:

With an operational income of ₹6,82,971 generated in FY 2024–25, women accessed regular earnings—allowing them greater autonomy and a step away from complete economic dependence. This shift also helped challenge traditional gender norms around paid work.



KARISHMA

Redefining Dignity In Waste Work

In her early 20s, Karishma, a caregiver in a family of four, brings her full self to her role as a Paryavaran Sakhi- ensuring village cleanliness with pride and confidence. She gets ready with proper makeup before work- not just as a personal choice, but as a statement of dignity and respect for her job. Through her perseverance and initiative-taking, she has demonstrated that waste work is leadership.



WAY FORWARD

The Paryavaran Sakhi model is already scaling through expanded community engagement tools like Chai pe Charcha, creative campaigns, and public recognition—building shared responsibility for waste. Financial sustainability is being strengthened by unlocking local government funds such as EDCs and piloting the Tourist Engagement Plan, where visitors interact with Sakhis and learn about their work—creating visibility and new income opportunities. Partnerships with schools, experts, and sponsors are deepening environmental outreach. Together, these efforts are turning rural waste management into a platform for climate action, community ownership, and women’s leadership.

Lessons From The Ground

What Works in Enabling Women-Led Climate Action



In the process of curating this compendium, we engaged with a range of CSOs actively supporting women-led climate action. Through these conversations, we gathered insights into the practical lessons they have learned while navigating the intersection of gender and climate. Certain themes and experiences emerged consistently across organizations. To make these insights accessible and actionable, we have organized the lessons into key archetypes. This structure allows CSOs seeking to integrate a gender perspective into their climate initiatives—or a climate perspective into their gender-focused work—to understand what approaches have proven effective. At the same time, it provides funders and the broader public with a clear view of scalable and replicable models for supporting transformative, women-centered climate action.

What Works



COLLECTIVE APPROACH

Collectives Create Safety, Legitimacy, and Staying Power

For women in conservative societies, moving together reduces the personal risk that can come from laying claim to greater mobility and public leadership roles. The backing of a collective also builds greater legitimacy for new or revived practices that women might be promoting for adoption at a community level. For instance, VAAGDHARA facilitated the formation of a dual structure of collectives—Sakshma Samooths, which were women only collectives, and Gram Swaraj Samooths, which were inclusive village level institutions that brought the entire community into the fold. This dual structure meant that women were not acting alone at any level; instead of relying on one individual woman to champion traditional seed preservation practices, they could collectively influence decisions and mobilise support, even at a key village-level institution. Likewise, RNBA designed implementation through SHGs, with women collectively endorsing SALT and FORLIS activities, while engaging with tribal elders and village authorities to secure buy-in—an approach that diffused resistance and embedded change in local consensus. In Lapse Kotdanda (Nepal), “One Household One Tap” was co-created and run through not one or two women leaders but through gender-inclusive Water User Committees, which increased the legitimacy of decisions that women leaders then took around water safety and availability planning.

Collectives Build Solidarity, Shared Learning

Where women face isolation or patriarchal gatekeeping, collective platforms become spaces for reflection, sharing, confidence-building, and public voice. In the Leaders for Commons (LfC) program, for instance, women leaders are linked across regions to trade strategies on issues like land encroachment and they have formed an informal community of practice that strengthens their presence in local governance. The Coastal Grassroots Fellowship (CGF) nurtured collective spaces already present in women’s everyday lives—through peer mentorship, community reading circles, group reflections, and village dialogues—so women could define the direction and meaning of their own leadership journeys. Buzz Green sustained behaviour change via structured group platforms such as Beehives (peer circles led by elected community anchors, that helped women reflect with each other apart from just mobilising other community members and interfacing with local government).

Collectives Unlock Infrastructure, Efficiency, and Economic Agency

Pooling resources through groups enables access to assets and markets that may be more difficult to reach for the individual woman. In the bamboo-based regenerative agroforestry program for instance, women are positioned not as individual growers but as co-owners of the ecosystem. Shared infrastructure like nurseries, pre-processing units (PPUs), and digital certification tools reduce individual burden and increase efficiency. These assets, combined with strong peer networks and joint decision-making through FPOs and producer collectives, have fostered trust, ownership, and long-term resilience.

Many Shapes, Shared Functions

Collectives don’t follow a single template. They appear as micro-level SHGs or women-only groups (Saksham Samooths), meso-level inclusive village bodies (Gram Swaraj Samooths), producer collectives/FPOs and Water User Committees, and macro-level peer networks (LfC) that span regions. Their forms vary, but their functions converge: safety in numbers, shared learning, pathways into governance, and access to infrastructure and markets. This is why collectivization—adapted to context—consistently underpins durable, community-owned climate solutions.



GROUND ACTION IN LOCAL REALITIES AND RELATABLE PRACTICES

Practical and Responsive Support Builds Ownership	Trust and Listening as the Entry Point	Rooting Change in Cultural Identity and Everyday Life
<p>Community ownership deepens when initiatives move beyond mobilising shared belief to actively addressing the gendered constraints people face. In Bundelkhand, the revival of tanks under BIWAL (Bundelkhand Initiative for Water, Agriculture and Livelihoods) drew on deep ancestral values attached to water bodies, values often upheld and transmitted by women. Yet many small and marginal farmers, particularly women-headed households, were unable to participate on equal terms due to limited access to assets such as transport for desilted soil and labour. By creating enabling, gender-responsive conditions, through shared transportation and pooled labour, the initiative ensured women’s participation was not merely symbolic but materially possible. This responsiveness translated into genuine community ownership, with over 70% of the revival effort contributed directly by the community.</p>	<p>Relatability also depends on process, not just design. For instance, the program for aquatic habitat restoration and fisheries development began not with prescriptions but with reflective dialogues. Women were invited to map ecological changes—like shrinking lakes and dying aquatic plants—based on their lived memory, while men’s groups also engaged separately to voice concerns. By elevating local knowledge as the starting point, the initiative framed sustainability as a shared responsibility emerging from within the community, rather than an external imposition. Programs that co-create with local groups—SHGs, community resource persons, or NGOs—tend to generate stronger acceptance. In the ASRLM partnership that SELCO facilitated, energy solutions were not parachuted in, but developed by integrating women’s aspirations, livelihood needs, and barriers. Co-creation ensured that solutions were woven into existing social and economic structures, making them not only more relatable but also more durable.</p>	<p>Relatability is strongest when climate action feels culturally familiar. In the Seed Sovereignty Program, women farmers used their own plots to demonstrate the benefits of indigenous seeds and regenerative farming. By anchoring solutions in agrarian identity, they framed new practices as a continuation of local tradition rather than alien ideas. Similarly, Buzz Green avoided technical jargon, linking abstract concepts like climate resilience to everyday practices—kitchen gardening, waste reduction—that women already understood. The Jal Doot program with adolescent girls recognized that climate leadership can begin with small, everyday actions that improve local environments. Whether it was testing water quality, fixing a leaking tap, or starting a neighbourhood awareness drive, these acts became on-ramps for girls to step into public, problem-solving roles. By valuing these efforts as leadership in their own right, the program showed that climate action is not just technical—it’s social, local, and deeply personal.</p>
Building Social Legitimacy for Women’s Leadership	Addressing Interconnected Realities, Not Isolated Issues	Context-Appropriate Technology Enhances Ownership
<p>When new roles challenge social norms, relatability is a precondition for acceptance. For instance, Women Prosper Initiative facilitated by Bindi International trained women as “Solar Sakhis” but recognised that technical training alone was insufficient. By involving SHGs in the identification process, setting up decentralized training hubs, and engaging families and community elders, the program built legitimacy around women’s participation. Leadership became rooted in community trust rather than individual aspiration alone. This ensured women could step into new roles with the backing of their families and communities, making participation easier to sustain over time.</p>	<p>Relatability also comes from seeing people’s lives in full. The Sanrakshan program recognised that women do not experience climate risks separately from food insecurity, unpaid care work, or violence. By acknowledging these intersections, it created pathways for climate action that resonated with women’s lived realities..</p>	<p>Technology gains traction when it matches users’ capacities. The At-Source Wet Waste Management initiative in Pune by SWaCH resisted costly, vendor-dependent machines in favour of simple composting and modular biogas systems. Because these were affordable, low-maintenance, and manageable by women with limited formal education, they created viable, self-sustaining enterprises. By aligning technology with people’s realities, the program generated both livelihoods and ecological impact.</p>



CREATE SUSTAINED SKILLING AND LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS

Integrating Technical and Leadership Capacities

Training that stops at technical skilling rarely translates into lasting change. What makes a difference is pairing technical knowledge with leadership, confidence, and decision-making capacity. RNBA in Manipur, for instance, did not just train women in SALT (Sloping Agricultural Land Technology) or FORLIS (Forest Restoration of Locally Important Species). It layered these with confidence-building and leadership awareness, enabling women to act as Eco Farm Champions who convened Farmer Field Schools, ran seed banks, and became trusted village experts in agroecology. Project Asmita in Gujarat similarly invested in “soft” skills—confidence, negotiation, and public speaking—alongside livelihoods like dairy and agriculture, helping women transition from beneficiaries to entrepreneurs and facilitators. Elsewhere, BIWAL in Bundelkhand embedded women in Tank Management Committees and Farmer Producer Organisations, giving them authority over water governance and planning. Across these initiatives, capacity-building was not a one-off transfer of skills, but a process of positioning women as leaders in technical as well as institutional spaces.

Ongoing Peer Learning and Mentorship

Sustained change requires structures for continuous peer-to-peer learning and layered support. Women who step into roles as trainers, fellows, and peer anchors ensure that knowledge circulates beyond initial trainings. In RNBA’s model, Eco Farm Champions acted as embedded mentors, guiding neighbours in adopting climate-resilient farming practices long after NGO facilitation receded. Bindi International’s Women Prosper Initiative (WPI) advanced Solar Sakhis into trainers and innovators, with mentorship and refresher trainings ensuring that confidence and technical expertise were passed forward. Coastal Grassroots Fellows in Odisha similarly combined technical learning with emotional and strategic mentorship, while public recognition validated them as credible leaders in coastal governance. Sanrakshan’s layered ecosystem blended skilling with peer support, mentorship, and exposure to government systems—enabling women not just to farm differently, but to lead on disaster preparedness and local planning. These models show that leadership is sustained not by one-off capacity building, but by embedding women in networks of recognition, mentoring, and solidarity.

Addressing Social and Market Barriers Alongside Skills

Even when women acquire technical and leadership capacities, their ability to act is constrained by risk, resistance, and market exclusion. Many face household opposition, social stigma, or fear of financial loss that makes them risk-averse. Effective models therefore de-risk early stages and address barriers head-on. In SELCO-ASRLM’s clean energy enterprises in Assam, women were hesitant to adopt solar-powered livelihoods until the program paired training with flexible financing, peer-led guidance, and gap support. Once risks were cushioned, women rapidly proved viability—boosting incomes and reducing drudgery. PRADAN’s Tribal Area Development Programme acknowledged the risks women face when entering public leadership, using community sensitisation to pre-empt backlash as women spearheaded solar lift irrigation systems. Industree’s bamboo-based agroforestry tackled exclusion from value chains by embedding certification tools and decentralised units that allowed marginal women producers to meet global standards. These approaches underline that without addressing risk aversion, social resistance, and market barriers, capacity building cannot translate into sustained transformation.



CREATE SYSTEMS INTEGRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL LINKAGES

Women as Institutional Architects

Women are not simply participants within existing institutions—they actively shape, govern, and repurpose them to serve community needs. In Project Asmita, federated women’s institutions (from SHGs to Block Federations) created accountability structures and influenced how schemes, markets, and financial systems were accessed. Similarly, in SCODWES’ beekeeping initiative, women organised through FPOs to aggregate honey and negotiate fairer market terms—transforming themselves from producers to institutional actors within the rural economy. These examples show how women embed themselves in systems not by being placed there, but by reconstituting those systems around their leadership.

Embedding Change in Formal Systems

Women-led models gain durability when they move beyond projects into policies, curricula, and governance systems. The SAWA Fellowship demonstrated this by embedding gender-equity principles into university programs and government engineering services in Nepal, ensuring that inclusivity became a professional norm in water management. SWaCH similarly secured policy recognition for decentralised composting by aligning with Pune’s municipal waste rules, while also negotiating acceptance at the community level through resident associations. These examples show how grassroots leadership doesn’t remain local—it translates into formal recognition, creating institutional pathways that outlast any single program.

Redefining Expertise in Public Platforms

Through systems integration, women challenge gendered assumptions about who holds knowledge and authority. In the Climate-Resilient Livelihoods Programme, women farmers engaged directly in block-level consultations and partnerships with universities—claiming entitlements, accessing technical expertise, and positioning themselves as legitimate farming experts. Likewise, in tribal community fisheries, women led negotiations linking ecological restoration, resource rights, and livelihoods, asserting themselves as indispensable resource stewards. In these platforms, women did not just “join the table”—they reset the terms of expertise itself.

Ecological and Institutional Literacy as Governance Tools

Institutional integration is also about women mastering and deploying governance mechanisms themselves. Leaders for Commons illustrated this vividly: elected women representatives in Andhra Pradesh used administrative tools like the Prohibitory Order Book to block land encroachments and safeguard community rights. Others tracked MGNREGA works to redirect public resources toward ecological restoration. By pairing ecological knowledge with institutional savvy, women acted as both environmental guardians and governance leaders.



ENSURE ECONOMIC VIABILITY

Aligning with Women's Realities

Economic models work when they fit into women's daily lives, constraints, and existing responsibilities. Beekeeping, for instance, succeeded in biodiversity-sensitive zones because it required little land, capital, or time away from home. Women could tend to hives in backyards and begin earning quickly, with some expanding into honey-based products. Similarly, the Buzzing for Biodiversity initiative paired income with ecological stewardship, making climate action feasible rather than burdensome.

Enabling Enterprise Ownership

Moving from worker to entrepreneur shifts agency. In Bindi International's Women Prosper Initiative, rural women weren't just trained in technical skills; they managed inventory, set sales targets, and dealt directly with customers. Flexible, sales-based earnings allowed them to balance household duties while building independent incomes. Over time, this sense of ownership and decision-making power redefined their role from beneficiaries to enterprise leaders.

Embedding Livelihoods in Collective Structures

When economic models are rooted in community-led platforms like SHGs, they build resilience and long-term viability. In Srishti's fisheries program, women-led SHGs not only distributed fish seed and feed inputs but also began experimenting with microfinance systems. As lake management shifted under Community Forest Rights, this collective stewardship ensured financial sustainability and local ownership—linking natural resource management with income generation.

Framing Work as Dignified

For livelihoods to endure, they must be seen and supported as dignified work rather than informal, invisible labour. In the Paryavaran Sakhi program, waste management was reframed as income-generating, professional work. By mobilising ₹4.26 lakh from local government funds and piloting tourism-based revenue streams, the program demonstrated that climate-linked livelihoods can achieve both social legitimacy and financial durability.



Synthesizing The Evidence

Insights on Impact & Scaling of Women-led Climate Action

This chapter presents a collective analysis of the multilayered impact observed across the case studies, and highlights what is needed to support and scale such integrated climate action.

Climate Level Impact

The case studies collectively reveal that the climate impacts of women-led initiatives cannot be understood only by tallying carbon savings or resource gains; their true significance lies in how they reshape the scales, synergies, and systems of climate action. Three critical insights stand out — women’s ability to link action across levels, integrate mitigation with adaptation, and transform knowledge and governance.



Multi-Scalar Climate Action

Women-led initiatives reveal how climate action is not confined to one scale of intervention but operates simultaneously at the household, community, and governance levels.

- At the household level, changes such as waste segregation, kitchen gardening, and crop diversification embed resilience in everyday routines.
- At the community level, collective management of tanks, forests, and fisheries regenerates shared resources that buffer entire populations against climate shocks.
- At the governance level, women’s participation in water user committees, SHGs, and panchayat forums has influenced system design and institutional priorities — ensuring inclusivity, equity, and long-term sustainability.

What distinguishes these initiatives from many top-down climate programmes is this multi-scalar weaving of impact: a single practice (say, tank restoration) secures household water needs, revives community agriculture, and reduces dependence on costly state supply systems. This layering of scales allows women-led models to achieve climate outcomes that are often missed when planning is siloed at either the household or policy level.



Mitigation–Adaptation Synergies

A striking feature of women-led climate action is that it tends to not treat mitigation (emissions reduction) and adaptation (resilience-building) as separate domains. Instead, interventions are designed to achieve dual benefits. For example, composting avoids methane emissions (mitigation) while simultaneously producing organic fertilizer that strengthens soil fertility (adaptation). Millet cultivation reduces dependence on chemical inputs (mitigation) while ensuring food security in drought-prone conditions (adaptation). Solar-powered irrigation replaces diesel (mitigation) while enabling year-round cultivation and income stability (adaptation). These synergies are not incidental but reflect women’s integrated perspective, shaped by their dual roles as caregivers and resource managers. Unlike policy frameworks that often separate climate priorities into sectoral silos, women’s models demonstrate that climate solutions can be simultaneously low-carbon and resilience-enhancing, particularly when grounded in local livelihoods.



Knowledge and Governance Shifts

Perhaps the most transformative climate impact lies not in technical outcomes but in epistemic and governance shifts. Women leaders challenge dominant framings of climate challenges and reorient solutions toward lived realities. For instance, in Nepal, redefining “water scarcity” as “water inaccessibility” shifted project design from expanding sources of water to ensuring infrastructure that would make water accessible at the household level. Similarly, women’s ecological observations — about pollination patterns, soil fertility, or changing fish populations — are important sources of knowledge on climate shifts and impact. They are using this lived knowledge to strengthen governance: water committees, SHGs, and forest protection groups become platforms where women’s voices influence decisions that were historically male-dominated. As a result, climate governance becomes more democratic, context-sensitive, and socially attuned. This insight underscores that climate action is not just about new technologies — it is about who defines the problem, whose knowledge counts, and who holds decision-making power.

Community-Level Impact

Women-led initiatives show that climate resilience emerges not only from infrastructure or technical solutions, but from shifts in social norms, collective action, and local governance. By anchoring climate practices in everyday routines and community networks, these efforts make resilience inclusive, locally owned, and sustainable.



Reframing Social Norms and Collective Identity

At the community level, women-led climate action has achieved more than improved services or restored ecosystems — it has reshaped norms of dignity, labour, and leadership. Waste work, water collection, or farming are redefined as skilled and valued contributions rather than stigmatised or invisible labour. Adolescent girls and SHG leaders entering decision-making spaces create new role models, making women's authority publicly visible. Importantly, many initiatives embed ecological practices in cultural and collective identity — from sacred framings of tank restoration to independent village institutions like Gram Swaraj Samooh's reimagining of governance around ecological justice. These shifts foster a sense of shared pride and belonging, embedding resilience not just in infrastructure but in the social fabric of the community.



From Individual Practices to Collective Stewardship

Women transform scattered household practices into community-owned systems that regenerate shared resources and sustain cooperation. What begins as kitchen gardening or water-saving evolves, through SHGs or water user committees, into tank revival, forest protection, and equitable irrigation schedules. These collective platforms redistribute responsibility, resolve conflicts, and strengthen cohesion across caste, class, and gender divides. By taking ownership of assets and rules, communities move from dependency on external agencies to active stewards of resilience. The impact is not only ecological but institutional: local bodies like Gram Sabhas, SHGs, and producer groups become stronger, more inclusive, and more legitimate as governance spaces.



Embedding Self-Reliance and Economic Resilience

A critical community-level impact is the creation of self-reliant systems and diversified local economies that buffer shocks. Women-led groups do not wait for external technicians or contractors; they repair pipelines, manage solar irrigation, and finance small-scale system upkeep themselves. Parallely, initiatives like bamboo cultivation, beekeeping, and seed banking generate income streams that circulate locally rather than leaking out. These practices reduce dependency — whether on state supply, external markets, or male outmigration — and strengthen the community's collective capacity to withstand uncertainty while sustaining livelihoods and autonomy.





Gender-Equality Impact

Women-led climate initiatives reveal that advancing gender equity is not a separate or incidental outcome—it is deeply intertwined with environmental action, local governance, and economic systems. Across diverse interventions, women’s engagement has reshaped social norms, expanded decision-making authority, and strengthened economic independence, producing lasting shifts in household, community, and institutional contexts.



Reframing Roles, Identities, and Public Presence

Participation in climate and community initiatives enabled women to move beyond traditional domestic and unpaid care roles, positioning them as leaders, decision-makers, and knowledge holders. Across case studies—from managing irrigation systems to leading SHGs, FPOs, and waste management programs—women gained visibility in public spaces, recognition as technical and governance experts, and credibility in spheres historically dominated by men. This transformation was both symbolic and structural: it enhanced women’s confidence, expanded their mobility, increased participation in household and community decisions, and inspired younger generations to imagine broader roles for themselves. Girls and adolescents also experienced similar shifts, gaining early exposure to leadership, civic engagement, and STEM learning, which normalized public participation and cultivated long-term aspirations beyond traditional gender norms.



Expanding Access to and Control over Resources

Economic empowerment emerged as a key lever for gender equality, intertwined with climate and community interventions. By leading initiatives such as agroforestry, bamboo cultivation, beekeeping, seed banks, and household-level water systems, women gained direct income, productive assets, and decision-making authority over resources. These interventions reduced dependency on male household members or exploitative market actors, stabilized livelihoods, and created pathways for sustainable self-reliance. Importantly, access to resources reinforced women’s ability to influence household and community decisions, cementing the link between economic agency and social empowerment.



Institutional and Governance Influence

Beyond personal and household impact, women’s leadership reshaped local and institutional governance. Through participation in Panchayats, Village Development Committees, SHGs, and producer collectives, women expanded institutional spaces for gender-inclusive decision-making, challenged entrenched biases, and anchored climate action within community governance. Programs facilitated peer networks, mentorship, and cross-community solidarity, enabling women to negotiate with government departments, engage in participatory planning, and translate grassroots efforts into systemic change. These processes demonstrated that gender equity is not only about individual empowerment but also about shifting power dynamics, redefining leadership norms, and embedding women’s voices in decision-making structures.

Intersectionality

Women's experiences are never a monolith, and the same holds true for the women leading and participating in the climate initiatives featured in this case study. While most of them come from rural contexts—often shaped by similar social norms that limit women's formal roles in village or household decision-making—their realities are far from uniform. Differences such as caste, class, sexuality and community status significantly influence how they experience leadership and participation.

For instance, in initiatives related to land and water governance, caste hierarchies often add another layer of negotiation. Women from marginalized castes have had to bear the additional burden of persuading upper-caste members to accept their leadership or even their presence in decision-making spaces. In waste management initiatives, the imprint of caste was even more visible, given the deep-seated stigma associated with waste work. Here, women were not only stepping out into public spaces and asserting their right to be recognized for their services, but also demanding dignity and respect in the face of work that has long been devalued and stigmatized.

This underscores the importance of examining intersectionality more deeply—understanding how gender intersects with caste, class, and other identities to shape both opportunities and barriers. Marginalized women, who shoulder much of the on-ground work in climate action, deserve particular attention—not as uniform beneficiaries, but as agents navigating complex structures of inequality while driving change.



Enabling Conditions for Scaling Women-Led Climate Action

The evidence of multilayered impact makes it clear that women-led climate initiatives are highly effective, context-sensitive, and transformative. Yet, achieving scale, sustainability, and systemic change requires deliberate support through funding, policy, and knowledge replication.



Strategic and Sustained Funding

Women-led models thrive when resources are flexible, long-term, and aligned with local realities. Short-term, project-based funding often constrains experimentation, restricts adaptive learning, and limits community ownership. Evidence shows that multi-year investments enable women to build trust networks, develop technical and governance capacities, and create resilient livelihood systems. Funding that supports both core operational costs and ecosystem-building activities—such as training, collective infrastructure, and peer networks—ensures that interventions do not collapse once initial grants end. Moreover, catalytic funding mechanisms such as learning grants can facilitate cross-learning, replication, and scaling.



Policy and Institutional Support

India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) acknowledges the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women, yet gender considerations remain weak in implementation, and the absence of a gender-responsive climate finance strategy further limits effectiveness¹. To address these gaps, experts advocate for a gender-transformative approach to climate policy. For instance, a framework by Asar Impact Advisors critiques traditional top-down, technocratic approaches and advocates for a shift towards policies that center the leadership and lived experiences of marginalized women in the Global South. It outlines five interconnected strategies: building feminist leadership, expanding social protection, supporting women-led cooperatives, amplifying regional-language climate media, and aligning with existing government schemes to ensure gender-transformative climate action rooted in social realities².

A critical pathway to operationalizing such approaches is convergence with India's existing institutional mechanisms. Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) Cells within ministries and state governments could be mandated to track climate finance through a gender lens, while monitoring frameworks for climate missions and State Action Plans could integrate gender-disaggregated indicators. At the local level, embedding a gender-climate lens into Village Development Plans (VDPs) and District Action Plans (DAPs) can institutionalize women's participation, safeguard access to resources, and integrate their knowledge into decision-making. Similarly, leveraging existing schemes such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) or MGNREGA provides a ready channel for scaling women-led, climate-resilient livelihoods. Together, these measures can ensure that women's climate leadership is not an add-on but a systemic priority across policy and finance.



CSO Engagement and Expansion

Scaling women-led climate action requires strengthening CSOs' capacity to integrate gender and climate lenses into their work. While CSOs already surface local priorities, enable participation, and connect communities to policy and market systems, many lack the frameworks, evidence, and technical expertise to engage deeply at this intersection. Investing in their knowledge and capacity would enable CSOs to design programs that recognize women's leadership, address structural inequities, and link community innovations to systemic change. Stronger capacities across the sector can ensure women-led models are not isolated experiments but part of a broader ecosystem that fosters peer learning, stronger networks, and more comprehensive responses to climate and gender challenges.

Together, the evidence underscores that women-led climate action delivers multilayered impacts—environmental, community, and gender-transformative—highlighting the urgent need for targeted funding, enabling policies, and expanded engagement by CSOs to scale and sustain these approaches.

1. Taylor & Francis, 2021 | 2. The Times of India, 2025

CONCLUSION

The analysis across the compendium's case studies demonstrates that women-led climate initiatives create transformative, multi-layered impacts—shaping climate systems, strengthening community resilience, and advancing gender equity simultaneously. They highlight the ways in which inclusive and intersectional leadership can accelerate climate action that is not only more effective, but also more just and enduring. Across diverse contexts, these initiatives reveal the power of local knowledge, collective agency, and social networks in driving adaptation, mitigation, and governance outcomes that conventional metrics often overlook.

At the same time, the case studies point to the need for deliberate, coordinated support across the ecosystem to unlock the full potential of women-led climate action. Sustained funding, responsive policy frameworks, and strengthened capacities within civil society are essential to ensure that these initiatives can scale, endure, and influence broader systems.



Actionable Recommendations

For Funders

Prioritize flexible and sustained funding:

Move beyond short-term project cycles to multi-year, trust-based funding that allows for experimentation, adaptive learning, and institution-building by women's collectives.

Support ecosystem-building, not just delivery:

Invest in training, community infrastructure, and peer networks that sustain women-led systems beyond the life of a grant.

Incentivize intersectional approaches:

Funding frameworks should explicitly recognize and reward projects that address intersecting vulnerabilities—such as caste, class, sexuality or geographic marginalization—within climate action.

For Policy Advocates and Decision-Makers

Institutionalize gender-responsive climate governance:

Integrate gender-disaggregated indicators and gender-climate targets into State and National Action Plans, and strengthen Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) mechanisms to track climate finance.

Leverage existing national schemes:

Embed women-led climate priorities within programs such as NRLM, VB-G RAM G, and Jal Jeevan Mission, ensuring local women's groups play a role in planning, implementation, and monitoring.

Recognize women's knowledge in formal systems:

Create pathways for community women leaders to inform policy design and advisory processes, validating local ecological knowledge as legitimate climate expertise.

For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Invest in intersectional capacity building:

Continue to equip teams to analyze and act on interlinkages, such as between gender, caste, livelihoods, and climate systems.

Collaborate:

Build cross-sector networks to share best practices and pool resources to amplify women's climate leadership.

Document and share lived innovations:

Develop evidence repositories and learning platforms to capture women's knowledge, replicable practices, and governance models that inform policy and funding priorities.



Limitations & Areas for Future Research

While this compendium captures the diversity and depth of women-led climate action across multiple geographies and themes, several limitations remain that merit deeper inquiry and reflection.

Limited visibility of intersectional realities:

Although the case studies highlight women's leadership and collective agency, the influence of intersecting factors such as caste, class, ethnicity, and geography remains less visible in the documentation. This gap limits a full understanding of how structural inequalities shape women's participation and leadership trajectories within climate initiatives. Future research should intentionally center intersectionality by generating disaggregated data (by caste, class, age, and location), engaging directly with diverse women's voices, and using participatory methods that can surface nuanced experiences. Such approaches would help illuminate the differentiated challenges and forms of leadership that exist within "women-led" climate action.

Underrepresentation of urban and peri-urban contexts:

The case studies predominantly draw from rural areas, where collective and ecosystem-based climate action has been more visible. However, women in urban and peri-urban contexts face distinct vulnerabilities and opportunities—particularly around waste work, water management, and informal livelihoods. Future research should expand documentation in these contexts to capture the evolving nature of women's climate leadership in urbanizing spaces.

Exploring the nuances of qualitative impact:

The compendium highlights the qualitative impact of women-led climate action by structuring insights across climate, community, and gender equality levels. This approach brings out the relational, social, and governance-oriented shifts that are often overlooked in conventional, quantitative heavy reporting. At the same time, there is scope to explore additional qualitative frameworks that can illuminate which dimensions of impact resonate most with key stakeholders—such as policymakers, funders, and community actors. Doing so could deepen understanding of women's climate leadership, make its outcomes more actionable, and strengthen the connection between grassroots experiences and decision-making processes.

Understanding longer-term impact and sustainability:

The compendium presents evidence primarily from a specific phase of women-led climate initiatives, providing rich insights into immediate outcomes at the climate, community, and gender equality levels. It also highlights the ways in which initiatives are planning for sustainability, and in many cases, the foundations for self-sustaining programs are already in place. There is an opportunity to complement this with longitudinal perspectives that track how initiatives evolve over time, sustain themselves, and continue influencing governance and community processes. Exploring these dynamics in future work could provide even more valuable guidance for designing durable, self-sustaining models of women's climate leadership.

By centering women's leadership in climate action, we not only address inequities, but also strengthen the effectiveness, resilience, and adaptability of climate solutions themselves. This compendium affirms that investing in women-led climate initiatives is not simply a moral imperative—it is a strategic pathway to transformative, equitable, and sustainable climate outcomes.



Get in Touch:

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