



**Adaptive Leadership,
Resilient Economies:
Women’s Role in Climate and
Disaster Preparedness and
Recovery in the Indo-Pacific**

April 2026

This work was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada.

This research was prepared collaboratively by members of a Working Group convened by the Women, Peace and Security Network–Canada (WPSN-C). It reflects the collective efforts, expertise, and contributions of Working Group members. The findings and analysis presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of all members of the WPSN-C or of Global Affairs Canada.

WPSN-C gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following Working Group members:

- Andrea Carstensen
- Chloe Silvestre (CARE Canada)
- Damilola Afolabi
- Denise Koh (MedResRX)
- Erika O'Halloran (Canadian Red Cross)
- Joelle Greimer
- Katrina Leclerc
- Laura Vandergriendt (Mennonite Central Committee Canada)
- Mariam Karmazanashvili
- Marijke De Pauw (Humanity and Inclusion Canada)
- Monique Cuillerier
- Nilofar Kayhan (CARE Canada)
- Shayne Wong
- Sophia Papastavrou
- Subrata Banerjee

Published by the Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada (WPSN-C)

April 2026



©WPSN-C, 2026

All rights reserved.

wpsn-canada.org

 [/women-peace-and-security-network-canada](https://www.linkedin.com/company/women-peace-and-security-network-canada)

Contact us at:
coordinator@wpsn-canada.org



Adaptive Leadership, Resilient Economies: Women's Role in Climate and Disaster Preparedness and Recovery in the Indo-Pacific



SECTION 1 — Introduction and Policy Context

Climate-related disasters are increasingly shaping economic trajectories across the Indo-Pacific, with direct implications for human security, development, and regional stability. The Indo-Pacific was chosen because climate-related disasters are already reshaping economic trajectories across a region that is home to roughly 60 percent of the world's population, with major implications for human security, development, and regional stability.¹

These impacts are not evenly distributed. Women, young women, and girls experience disproportionate vulnerability due to structural inequalities in access to resources, decision-making spaces, and economic opportunities. At the same time, prevailing policy and research frameworks continue to position women primarily as affected populations rather than as economic and political actors shaping resilient outcomes.

This framing obscures a critical reality: across the Indo-Pacific, women are already leading climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, and recovery efforts at community, sub-national, and national levels. Their leadership is not only socially transformative but also economically consequential.

This paper responds directly to the following analytical priorities:

- how women's leadership influences economic resilience,
- how women's economic participation shapes adaptive capacity,
- and how women's political participation affects climate and disaster governance.

Anchored in Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy² and its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2023–2029),³ the analysis and recommendations will inform Global Affairs Canada's forward-looking policy development and help shape Canada's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific on women's economic contributions to climate and disaster resilience. As climate shocks undermine economic resilience and regional stability, they also influence the overall effectiveness of Canada's engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Drawing on a literature and policy review, comparative case studies, and practitioner-generated evidence, this paper advances three core arguments.

First, women's leadership is a driver of economic resilience— meaning the ability for economies to resume core functions after crisis including adapting structures to build future resilience⁴—is not simply a component of social inclusion. Across cases, women's leadership contributes to stabilizing livelihoods, reducing economic losses, and accelerating recovery.

¹ Mundra, A., & Jayaram, D. (2023). Climate change and security in the Indo-Pacific. *Global South Policy Review*. <https://globalsouthpolicy.org/climate-change-and-security-in-the-indo-pacific/>; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2026). Population trends. <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/topics/population-trends>

² Government of Canada. (2024). Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy. Global Affairs Canada. <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparence-transparence/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/index.aspx?lang=eng>

³ Government of Canada. (2024). Foundations for peace: Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2023–2029). Global Affairs Canada. https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/gender_equality-egalite_des_genres/cnap_wps-pnac_fps.aspx?lang=eng

⁴ Sustainable Prosperity. (n.d.). Economic Resilience. Sustainable Prosperity. <https://sustainable-prosperity.eu/sustainable-prosperity/economic-resilience/>



Second, the relationship between women’s economic participation and resilience is conditional, not automatic. Participation contributes to resilience when supported by enabling conditions such as access to finance, social protection, and decision-making power; without these, it may instead increase exposure to climate-induced risk.

Third, women’s leadership operates through distinct but interconnected pathways—economic, governance, and social—which together shape adaptive capacity and recovery outcomes.

By centring these dynamics, the paper aims to move beyond normative arguments for inclusion and instead demonstrate the material and economic implications of women’s leadership for climate-resilient economies.



SECTION 2 — Conceptual Framework: Women’s Leadership and Economic Resilience

Climate change is no longer a future risk; it is a present and accelerating reality, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. As one of the most disaster-prone regions globally, the Indo-Pacific is experiencing increasingly frequent and severe climate-related shocks, including droughts, flooding, extreme heat, and typhoons.⁵ These disruptions have cascading effects on economic systems, from agricultural productivity and labour markets to supply chains and infrastructure.

At the same time, they expose and deepen existing inequalities, particularly along gender lines, with women, including young women and girls, older women, women with disabilities, women from ethnic and gender minorities and women living in rural areas disproportionately affected.⁶

A growing body of academic and policy literature highlights that resilience is not solely determined by environmental or technical capacity, but by governance structures, social relations, and economic inclusion. Within this framing, women’s leadership—across political, economic, and community domains—emerges as a critical but underexamined factor shaping resilience outcomes.⁷

2.1 From Participation to Leadership: An Analytical Lens

Participation focuses on inclusion within existing structures, while leadership captures women’s role in shaping decisions, influencing outcomes, and driving change. This distinction is particularly important in climate and disaster contexts, where leadership determines not only who is included, but whose knowledge, priorities, and strategies shape resilience pathways.

This paper, therefore, adopts a leadership-centred lens, examining how women’s leadership operates across three interconnected domains:

- economic systems (livelihoods, markets, financial mechanisms),
- governance structures (policy, planning, institutional coordination),
- and social systems (norms, networks, and collective action).

⁵ Gooty, S. (2025, November 14). From Farms to Frontlines: Women Shaping Asia-Pacific’s Climate Future. UNDP: Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/blog/farms-frontlines-women-shaping-asia-pacifics-climate-future>; United Nations Population Fund. (n.d.). Population Trends. UNFPA in Asia and the Pacific. <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/topics/population-trends>.

⁶ Action Aid. (2024). Transforming Disaster Response: Women-led Climate Solutions in Asia and the Pacific. Action Aid Australia. <https://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/ActionAid-Report-Transforming-Disaster-Response-Women-Led-Climate-Solutions-in-Asia-and-the-Pacific-2024.pdf>; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific & Barriga Ramos, M., & Lindström Oguzhan, C. (2023). Advancing gender equality in Asia and the Pacific in the context of climate change (Social Development Policy Paper No. 2023/09). UNESCAP. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/escap-2023-pb-advancing-gender-equality-asia-pacific-context-climate-change.pdf>

⁷ Asian Development Bank. (n.d.). CRFPF Overview. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/funds/community-resilience-financing-partnership-facility/overview>; UN Women. (n.d.). Women’s Resilience to Disasters (WRD) Programme. UN Women WRD Knowledge Hub. <https://wrd.unwomen.org/about/programme>; UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (2021). Booklet: Women’s International Network on Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR). UNDRR. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/booklet-womens-international-network-disaster-risk-reduction-win-drr>.



2.2 Women's Leadership and Economic Stability

Evidence from across the Indo-Pacific demonstrates that women's leadership contributes to more inclusive and economically stabilizing policy outcomes. At the national level, women's meaningful participation in climate governance and disaster risk reduction processes is associated with policies that prioritize social protection, public health, and community resilience.⁸ These policy choices have direct economic implications, particularly in contexts where informal economies, smallholder agriculture, and household-level production underpin national economic systems.

Women policymakers and leaders often prioritize investments that strengthen economic stability over the long-term, including support to low-income households, access to services, and livelihood protection.⁹ These interventions mitigate economic disruptions often associated with climate shocks.

At the community level, women's leadership plays a central role in stabilizing local economies during and after climate-related disruptions. Women-led initiatives frequently focus on food security, livelihood diversification, and collective resource management—areas that are critical for maintaining economic continuity in times of crisis. These contributions are often informal or under-recognized, yet they directly shape recovery trajectories. This aligns with findings that women's local leadership enhances risk communication, resource targeting, and social cohesion,¹⁰ while targeted investments in women's leadership improve the effectiveness of adaptation measures.¹¹

2.3 Women's Economic Participation and Adaptive Capacity

Women's economic participation is widely recognized as a key determinant of adaptive capacity. When women have access to income, productive assets, and financial services—and the opportunity and resources to mobilize collectively, for example through cooperatives—households are better positioned to absorb shocks, diversify livelihoods, and invest in climate adaptation strategies.¹² However, these benefits materialize only when participation is supported by enabling conditions that ensure women can exercise agency and retain control over the economic gains they generate.

Regional initiatives further demonstrate that women's participation in sectors such as renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, and green entrepreneurship enhances both household income and community resilience.¹³ However, the relationship between participation and resilience is not straightforward. Across the Indo-Pacific, women are disproportionately concentrated in climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and informal trade. In the absence of supportive policies—such as access to credit, insurance, land rights, and social protection—economic participation can increase women's exposure to climate risks rather than reduce it.¹⁴ This underscores that participation alone does not strengthen adaptive capacity; it must be paired with institutional supports that reduce risk and enhance women's ability to benefit from their labour.

⁸ UN Women. (n.d.). Women's Resilience to Disasters (WRD) Programme.

⁹ Ergas, C., & York, R. (2012). Women's status and carbon dioxide emissions: A quantitative cross-national analysis. *Social Science Research*, 41(4), 965–976. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.03.008>; Rao, N., Lawson, E. T., Raditloaneng, W. N., Solomon, D., & Angula, M. N. (2019). Gendered vulnerabilities to climate change: insights from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia. *Climate and Development*, 11(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2017.1372266>

¹⁰ Enarson, E., & Meyreles, L. (2004). International perspectives on gender and disaster: differences and possibilities. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 24(10/11), 49–93. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01443330410791064>.

¹¹ Asian Development Bank. (n.d.). CRFPF Overview.

¹² Doss, C. R. (2018). Women and Agricultural Productivity: Reframing the Issues. *Development Policy Review*, 36(1), 35–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12243>.

¹³ United Nations Development Program. (2026, March 8). When young women step into the policymaking space. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/stories/when-young-women-step-policy-making-space>.

¹⁴ Asian Development Bank. (n.d.). CRFPF Overview.; Asian Development Bank. (2022, May). Scaling Up Women-Centered Adaptation through the Community Resilience Partnership Program's Gender Window. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/publications/women-centered-adaptation-gender-window-technical-note>; Sovacool, B. K., & In, J. (2026). Harness gender empowerment to achieve climate justice, sustainability, and equity. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 176, Article 104314. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2026.104314>.



This is further compounded by women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work, which intensifies in times of crisis as climate-related shocks disrupt schools, health systems, and basic services, creating additional barriers to meaningful participation and delaying both household and community recovery efforts.¹⁵ Without measures that redistribute or reduce unpaid care burdens, women's economic roles may expand without improving their adaptive capacity.

This highlights a critical distinction: it is not participation alone that drives resilience, but the conditions under which participation occurs. Economic participation contributes to resilience when it is accompanied by agency, control over resources, and access to favourable institutional supports. Adaptive capacity increases only when women's economic roles are matched with decision-making power, risk-reducing protections, and equitable access to the resources needed to translate participation into stability and long-term security.

2.4 Women's Political Participation and Climate Governance

Women's political participation—whether in formal institutions such as parliaments and local councils or in informal governance structures—shapes climate adaptation and disaster response in ways that affect economic outcomes and unlock context-specific solutions in complex crises. Women's leadership is explicitly recognized as essential to inclusive risk reduction under global frameworks such as the Sendai Framework.¹⁶ To strengthen governance quality, women's participation must be accompanied by the authority and institutional support needed to influence decision-making processes.

Empirical studies show that higher levels of women's political representation are associated with stronger climate policies and increased investment in social infrastructure.¹⁷ These investments reduce long-term economic losses by strengthening health systems, education, and social protection. These governance gains emerge when women's representation is meaningful rather than symbolic, supported by gender-responsive institutions.

In the Indo-Pacific, women's leadership in climate governance is not limited to formal political roles. Women's groups, cooperatives, and civil society organizations often are required to inform and influence policy implementation, local planning, and resource allocation. Emerging evidence also highlights the role of younger women and community-based leaders in shaping locally rooted and context-specific climate governance through networks and participatory processes.¹⁸ However, these contributions translate into long-term resilience only when women have consistent access to decision-making spaces, resources, and protections that allow their leadership to shape governance outcomes.

2.5 Gender-Responsive Leadership Practices

The literature consistently identifies a set of gender-responsive leadership practices that build enabling conditions for resilience across governance levels.

Inclusive governance structures are foundational. When women hold institutionalized roles within disaster risk reduction committees, climate finance mechanisms, and local planning bodies, decision-making processes become more responsive to diverse needs and more attuned to social dimensions of risk.¹⁹

¹⁵ United Nations Development Programme. (2025). Women's Leadership at the heart of disaster risk management. <https://www.undp.org/blog/womens-leadership-heart-disaster-risk-reduction>

¹⁶ UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (2021). Booklet: Women's International Network on Disaster Risk Reduction (WIN DRR). UNDRR. <https://www.undrr.org/publication/booklet-womens-international-network-disaster-risk-reduction-win-drr>.

¹⁷ Mavisakalyan, A., & Tarverdi, Y. (2019). Gender and climate change: Do female parliamentarians make a difference? *European Journal of Political Economy*, 56, 151–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2018.08.001>; Norgaard, K., & York, R. (2005). Gender Equality and State Environmentalism. *Gender & Society*, 19(4), 506–522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204273612>.

¹⁸ United Nations Development Program. (2026, March 8). When young women step into the policymaking space.

¹⁹ Enarson, E., & Meyreles, L. (2004). International perspectives on gender and disaster: differences and possibilities. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 24(10/11), 49–93. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01443330410791064>; Mavisakalyan, A., & Tarverdi, Y. (2019). Gender and climate change: Do female parliamentarians make a difference?



Programmatic evidence from the Indo-Pacific further demonstrates that embedding women's leadership across governance levels improves the quality and inclusiveness of climate risk assessments.²⁰

Vertical coordination between national institutions and community-based women's groups is equally important. Evidence from Pacific contexts shows that collaboration between government actors and women's networks strengthens the integration of local knowledge into policy and enhances adaptation outcomes.²¹ Effective strategies to reduce community vulnerabilities to disasters have relied on locally inclusive planning and implementation, supported by multisectoral and multidisciplinary approaches that can be scaled, including through early warning systems. At the same time, persistent fragmentation across disaster and conflict policy and regulatory frameworks continues to limit effective gender mainstreaming, alongside gaps in women's leadership within government institutions and formal early warning mechanisms. Strengthening community-level gender and risk analyses—including through feminist participatory action research—can help bridge these gaps, while creating feedback loops that ensure local implementation realities inform national policy development.²²

Legal and policy frameworks also play a critical role. Gender-responsive laws—such as those related to land rights, access to credit, and protection from violence—directly shape women's ability to participate in and benefit from climate resilience initiatives.²³ In many contexts, limited land ownership restricts women's access to services, technologies, and compensation mechanisms.²⁴ These dynamics are rooted in broader forms of gender discrimination that limit women's control over resources and opportunities; while disasters tend to intensify these inequalities, they also create entry points for policy and institutional change.²⁵

Gender-responsive budgeting is another key mechanism. Integrating gender considerations into climate and disaster-related expenditures ensures that resources are allocated in ways that address gendered vulnerabilities and support women's leadership.²⁶ While some Indo-Pacific countries have begun incorporating gender markers into climate finance, implementation remains uneven.

Women's economic leadership is increasingly recognized as a driver of resilience. Investments in women-led enterprises and cooperatives support livelihood diversification, income stability, and access to adaptive technologies.²⁷

²⁰ UN Women. (n.d.). Women's Resilience to Disasters (WRD) Programme.

²¹ Bhagwan-Rolls, S. & Kitone, C. (2022, July 24). Inter-generational feminist collaboration for transformative action in the Pacific. UN Women – Women's Resilience to Disasters Knowledge Hub. <https://wrdd.unwomen.org/explore/insights/inter-generational-feminist-collaboration-transformative-action-pacific>; Hemachandra, K., Amaratunga, D. & Haigh, R. (2025). A Comprehensive Framework for Empowering Women in Disaster Risk Governance in Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 16, 768–780. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13753-025-00676-9>; Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme. (2026, March 13). Magnifying Pacific women's voices in environmental and social impact assessments. SPREP. <https://www.sprep.org/news/magnifying-pacific-women-voices-in-environmental-and-social-impact-assessments>; Singh, P., Tabe, T., & Martin, T. (2022).

The role of women in community resilience to climate change: A case study of an Indigenous Fijian community. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 90, Article 102550. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsf.2021.102550>;

²² UN Women. (2022, September). Women's leadership and participation in addressing conflict risks and promoting disaster preparedness: A scoping study in Indonesia, Philippines and Viet Nam. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/09/womens-leadership-and-participation-in-addressing-conflict-risks-and-promoting-disaster-preparedness-a-scoping-study-in-indonesia-philippines-and-viet-nam>

²³ Doss, C. R. (2018). Women and Agricultural Productivity: Reframing the Issues.; Rao, N., Lawson, E. T., Raditloaneng, W. N., Solomon, D., & Angula, M. N. (2019). Gendered vulnerabilities to climate change: insights from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia.

²⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture, 2010-11*. FAO. <https://www.fao.org/4/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>.

²⁵ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (n.d.). Women's leadership. <https://www.undrr.org/gender/womens-leadership>

²⁶ Kanwar, S. (2016). Gender Responsive Budgeting in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Status Report. UN Women. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/12/gender-responsive-budgeting-in-the-asia-pacific>.; Rao, N., Lawson, E. T., Raditloaneng, W. N., Solomon, D., & Angula, M. N. (2019). Gendered vulnerabilities to climate change: insights from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia.

²⁷ United Nations Development Program. (2026, March 8). When young women step into the policymaking space.; UN Women. (n.d.). Women's Resilience to Disasters (WRD) Programme.; UN Women. (2023). Final Report Annexes: Formative Evaluation of UN Women's Work in the Area of Climate Change. UN Women. <https://gate.unwomen.org/EvaluationDocument/Download?evaluationDocumentID=10064>.



Finally, data and accountability systems are essential. The absence of sex-disaggregated data limits effective policy design and risks reinforcing inequalities.²⁸ Strengthening monitoring systems and ensuring women's participation in assessment processes are critical for translating gender commitments into practice.²⁹



SECTION 3 — Comparative Case Analysis: Women's Leadership Pathways to Economic Resilience

Building on the conceptual framework, this section examines how women's leadership contributes to economic resilience across different contexts in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing on comparative case studies and a broader set of practitioner-generated examples (see Annex 4), the analysis identifies recurring patterns in how leadership operates and the conditions under which it produces economic outcomes.

Rather than only presenting cases as isolated examples (see later three case study examples, also see Annexes 1-3), this section uses collective examples compiled by members of the WPSN-C to illustrate three interconnected pathways through which women's leadership strengthens resilience:

1. stabilizing local economies,
2. strengthening adaptive capacity, and
3. transforming governance systems.

3.1 Stabilizing Local Economies through Collective and Localized Leadership

Across cases, women's leadership plays a central role in stabilizing local economies during climate shocks by organizing collective economic structures, diversifying livelihoods, and maintaining continuity of production.

The Cambodia case (see Annex 1) illustrates how women's leadership within agricultural

cooperatives directly contributes to income stability and food security. Women leaders were not only participants but decision-makers within cooperative governance structures, managing finances, coordinating activities, and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits. These roles enabled cooperatives to function as economic safety nets during periods of drought and flooding, while also supporting longer-term income generation through diversified agricultural production.

This pattern is reinforced across additional examples captured in the dataset (see Annex 4). Women's groups, cooperatives, and community-based platforms repeatedly emerge as key economic actors, particularly in rural and disaster-prone contexts. These structures allow women to pool resources, share risk, and coordinate responses to climate variability. In the Philippines, women's leadership has also demonstrated this pattern through structured and scalable models. For example, women-led initiatives such as the Art Relief Mobile Kitchen (ARMK) have provided rapid food system stabilization following disasters, while national frameworks such as the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act and the People's Survival Fund have institutionalized risk reduction and climate adaptation. Together, these examples illustrate how women's leadership operates across community, financial, and governance systems to support economic resilience. In Vietnam, tea plantations are a key cash crop in remote northern mountainous regions and are regularly at risk of degradation due to extreme weather, pests, and disease, which diminishes overall crop quality (see Annex 2). Investing in women-led groups pursuing climate-resistant tea farming strategies helped safeguard an important, profitable household farming activity, demonstrating women's positive influence on sustainable community economic resources.

²⁸ Arora Jonsson, S. (2011). Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(2), 744–751. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.01.005>.

²⁹ Asian Development Bank. (2022, May). *Scaling Up Women-Centered Adaptation through the Community Resilience Partnership Program's Gender Window*; UN Women. (n.d.). *Women's Resilience to Disasters (WRD) Programme*.



Importantly, these forms of leadership often emerge organically in response to crises. In disaster-affected communities, women initially engage in informal support roles—organizing food distribution, coordinating care, or sharing resources—which then evolve into more structured leadership positions. This transition highlights the fluid boundary between social and economic roles, where leadership in community response becomes a foundation for economic resilience.

The evidence suggests that women’s leadership stabilizes local economies not only by increasing income, but by maintaining the functioning of economic systems under stress—including food systems, informal markets, and household-level production.

3.2 Strengthening Adaptive Capacity through Knowledge, Skills, and Financial Systems

A second pathway through which women’s leadership contributes to resilience is by strengthening adaptive capacity at household and community levels. This occurs through the dissemination of climate-relevant knowledge, the adoption of adaptive practices, and the creation of financial systems that enable risk management.

The Vietnam case (see Annex 2) provides a clear example of this dynamic. Women’s leadership was cultivated through Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), which served as both financial mechanisms and platforms for leadership development. These groups enabled women to access capital, build financial literacy, and invest in climate-smart agricultural practices.

What distinguishes this case is the integration of economic participation with leadership development and climate adaptation. Women leaders facilitated risk mapping, promoted diversified livelihoods, and introduced practices such as crop rotation, bio-organic fertilization, and climate-resilient livestock management. These interventions reduced vulnerability to climate shocks while increasing income stability.

Similar dynamics are evident in other examples from the dataset (see Annex 4). Women-led savings groups and financial cooperatives function as critical resilience mechanisms, enabling households to absorb shocks, invest in recovery, and adopt new livelihood strategies. In contexts where access to formal financial systems is limited, these collective structures often represent the primary source of capital for adaptation.

The Nepal case (see Annex 3) further highlights the role of knowledge and mentorship in building adaptive capacity. Through a layered mentorship model, women developed technical expertise in climate-health risks and began to act as local resource persons within their communities. This shift—from recipients of information to producers and disseminators of knowledge—strengthened community preparedness and response capacity.

Insights from the Nepal-focused analysis (see Annex 4) reinforce these findings, particularly in relation to the role of women’s groups in climate adaptation practices such as water management, seed banking, and community awareness initiatives. However, these examples also highlight persistent constraints, including limited access to finance, exclusion from formal decision-making spaces, and gaps in institutional support. These barriers underscore that adaptive capacity is shaped not only by local leadership, but by the broader enabling environment.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate that women’s leadership strengthens adaptive capacity by linking knowledge, financial systems, and collective action, enabling communities to anticipate, absorb, and respond to climate risks.

3.3 Transforming Governance Systems and Decision-Making

Beyond local economic and adaptive outcomes, women’s leadership also contributes to transforming governance systems in ways that have broader economic implications.



In the Cambodia case (Annex 1), women’s participation in commune-level technical teams and committees expanded their influence beyond economic activities into local governance. Women leaders contributed to decision-making on resource allocation, community planning, and conflict resolution, strengthening institutional responsiveness to local needs.

Similarly, in Vietnam (Annex 2), women’s leadership extended into community-level governance processes, where women began to influence climate risk planning and engage with local authorities and value chain actors. This expansion of leadership into governance spaces reflects a shift from participation to influence, where women are not only included in processes but actively shaping them.

The broader dataset further illustrates how women’s leadership intersects with formal governance structures. In the Philippines, women’s leadership spans both institutional and community-level governance, including national disaster risk reduction legislation, climate finance mechanisms, and local response systems. At the national level, women leaders have contributed to the institutionalization of disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation through legislative and policy frameworks. At the sub-national level, climate finance mechanisms such as the People’s Survival Fund support locally driven adaptation initiatives. At the community level, women-led models—such as mobile kitchens and ecosystem restoration initiatives—provide immediate stabilization of food systems and livelihoods following disasters. Together, these layered forms of leadership illustrate how governance, finance, and community action interact to support economic resilience in highly disaster-prone contexts (see more in Annex 4).

At the same time, several entries highlight that governance transformation remains uneven. Women’s leadership is often concentrated at community levels, with limited representation in higher-level decision-making structures. Structural barriers—including gender norms, unequal access to education and resources, and

institutional constraints—continue to limit the translation of local leadership into formal political influence.

This tension points to a critical insight: while women’s leadership is already contributing to resilience, its full economic impact depends on the extent to which it is recognized, supported, and institutionalized within governance systems.

3.4 Cross-Cutting Insights: Conditions for Impact

Across cases and examples (Annexes 1-4), several enabling conditions emerge as critical for translating women’s leadership into economic resilience outcomes.

First, leadership is most effective when embedded in collective structures, such as cooperatives, savings groups, and community networks. These structures amplify individual agency and enable coordinated action.

Second, access to financial resources—whether through formal or informal mechanisms—is essential. Without access to capital, women’s leadership in adaptation and recovery remains constrained.

Third, interventions that address social norms and unpaid care work have significant multiplier effects. By redistributing care responsibilities and increasing women’s decision-making power within households, these interventions enable sustained participation in economic and leadership activities.

Fourth, linkages between local and institutional levels are critical. Where women’s leadership is connected to formal governance structures, its impact on policy and resource allocation is significantly strengthened.

Finally, the cases highlight the importance of integrated approaches. Initiatives that combine leadership development, economic participation, and climate adaptation consistently produce stronger and more sustainable outcomes than those focusing on a single dimension.



SECTION 4 — Policy Implications for Global Affairs Canada

The findings of this analysis have direct implications for Global Affairs Canada’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in relation to its Indo-Pacific Strategy³⁰ and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2023–2029).³¹ They point to a need to move beyond framing women’s leadership as a cross-cutting or complementary issue, and instead position it as a core component of economic resilience, climate adaptation, and regional stability.

A first implication is the need to recognize women’s leadership as an economic and strategic investment. Across cases, women’s leadership contributes to stabilizing livelihoods, reducing economic losses, and accelerating recovery following climate shocks. These outcomes align directly with Canada’s priorities related to resilient supply chains, sustainable development, and economic growth in the Indo-Pacific.³² Integrating women’s leadership more explicitly into economic and climate programming would therefore strengthen both development and foreign policy objectives.

Second, the analysis underscores the importance of integrated programming approaches. The most effective initiatives do not treat women’s economic participation, leadership, and climate adaptation as separate domains. Rather, they combine financial inclusion, leadership development, and technical support for climate-resilient livelihoods. This suggests that Canadian programming should prioritize multi-sectoral interventions that link these dimensions, rather than siloed approaches that address them in isolation.

Third, the findings highlight the value of locally led and network-based approaches. Women’s leadership is most visible and impactful at community and sub-national levels, where women’s groups, cooperatives, and civil society organizations play central roles in adaptation and recovery. Supporting these actors—through flexible funding, long-term partnerships, and capacity strengthening—can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Canadian investments.

At the same time, the analysis points to a persistent gap in the vertical integration of leadership. While women’s leadership is often strong at local levels, it is less consistently reflected in national policy and decision-making structures. Canada is well-positioned to support initiatives that strengthen linkages between community-level leadership and institutional processes, including through support to governance reforms, policy dialogue, and capacity building within public institutions.

Fourth, there is a clear role for Canada in advancing gender-responsive climate finance. Access to financial resources remains one of the most significant constraints limiting women’s ability to lead adaptation and recovery efforts. This includes both access to formal financial systems and targeted funding for women-led enterprises and initiatives. Canadian investments in climate finance, development finance, and private sector partnerships could more systematically incorporate gender-responsive criteria to ensure that resources reach women-led actors.

³⁰ Government of Canada. (2024). Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

³¹ Government of Canada. (2024). Foundations for peace: Canada’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2023–2029).

³² Government of Canada. (2024). Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy.



Fifth, the findings highlight the importance of addressing structural barriers, particularly those related to social norms and unpaid care work. Interventions that reduce women’s care burden—such as investments in childcare, health services, and community infrastructure—have demonstrated significant effects on women’s ability to participate in economic and leadership activities. These investments should be understood not only as social policy measures, but as enabling conditions for economic resilience.

Finally, the analysis suggests opportunities to strengthen Canadian private sector engagement in ways that align with gender-responsive climate and economic objectives. Women-led enterprises and cooperatives are active across sectors that are central to climate resilience, including agriculture, renewable energy, and local supply chains. Supporting partnerships between Canadian businesses and women-led initiatives in the Indo-Pacific could contribute to both inclusive economic growth and more resilient value chains.

Taken together, these implications suggest that advancing women’s leadership is not only consistent with Canada’s feminist foreign policy commitments, but also central to achieving its broader strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific.



SECTION 5 — Key Findings

Drawing on the literature, comparative case analysis, and policy review, this research identifies several key findings regarding the role of women’s leadership in strengthening economic resilience in climate- and disaster-affected contexts across the Indo-Pacific.

1. Women’s leadership is a driver of economic resilience, not only a matter of inclusion

Across diverse contexts, women’s leadership contributes directly to stabilizing livelihoods, maintaining economic continuity, and accelerating recovery following climate shocks.

Women-led initiatives support food systems, local markets, and household economies, particularly in times of crisis. These contributions demonstrate that women’s leadership is not only socially transformative, but economically consequential.

2. Economic participation contributes to resilience only under enabling conditions

While women’s economic participation is widely recognized as important, the analysis shows that participation alone does not guarantee resilience. In many cases, women’s concentration in climate-sensitive and informal sectors increases exposure to risk. Economic participation contributes to resilience when it is supported by access to finance, control over resources, social protection, and decision-making power.

3. Collective structures are central to women’s leadership and economic outcomes

Women’s leadership is most effective when embedded in collective platforms such as cooperatives, savings groups, and community networks. These structures enable risk-sharing, resource pooling, and coordinated responses to climate variability. They also serve as entry points for leadership development, financial inclusion, and local governance engagement.

4. Women’s leadership strengthens adaptive capacity through integrated systems

Women’s leadership contributes to adaptive capacity by linking knowledge, financial systems, and livelihood strategies. Women leaders play key roles in disseminating climate-relevant knowledge, promoting adaptive practices, and supporting the adoption of diversified and climate-resilient livelihoods. Integrated approaches that combine these elements produce more sustainable outcomes.



5. Women’s leadership is strongest at local levels but unevenly reflected in formal governance

The analysis shows that women’s leadership is often most visible and effective at community and sub-national levels. However, this leadership is not consistently translated into influence within national policy and decision-making structures. Structural barriers—including gender norms, institutional constraints, and limited access to resources—continue to limit women’s participation in formal governance.

6. Addressing social norms and unpaid care work is critical to enabling leadership

Interventions that address unpaid care responsibilities and restrictive social norms significantly enhance women’s ability to participate in economic and leadership roles. Evidence from the cases demonstrates that reducing care burdens and engaging men in shifting norms creates enabling conditions for sustained leadership and economic participation.

7. Integrated, multi-sectoral approaches generate stronger and more sustainable outcomes

Initiatives that combine leadership development, economic participation, and climate adaptation consistently produce more impactful and durable results than those focusing on a single dimension. These integrated approaches strengthen resilience across economic, governance, and social systems simultaneously.



SECTION 6 — Recommendations and Strategic Considerations

Building on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to support Global Affairs Canada in strengthening its engagement on climate resilience, economic development, and Women, Peace and Security in the Indo-Pacific. These recommendations aim to translate evidence into actionable entry points across policy, programming, and partnerships.

6.1 Position Women’s Leadership as a Core Economic Resilience Strategy

Global Affairs Canada should explicitly frame women’s leadership as a driver of economic resilience within its Indo-Pacific programming and policy frameworks. This includes integrating women’s leadership objectives into climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and economic development initiatives, rather than treating them as secondary or cross-cutting considerations.

Doing so would align programmatic investments with evidence demonstrating that women’s leadership contributes to stabilizing livelihoods, reducing economic losses, and accelerating recovery following climate shocks.

6.2 Invest in Integrated Programming Linking Leadership, Economic Participation, and Climate Adaptation

Programming should prioritize integrated approaches that simultaneously support:

- women’s leadership development,
- access to economic opportunities and financial resources,
- and adoption of climate-resilient practices.

Evidence from the cases shows that interventions combining these elements generate more sustainable and scalable outcomes than those addressing them in isolation. This includes supporting models such as savings groups, cooperatives, and women-led enterprises that serve as entry points for both leadership and economic resilience.

6.3 Expand Gender-Responsive Climate Finance and Direct Support to Women-Led Initiatives

Access to finance remains a critical barrier to women’s leadership in climate adaptation and recovery. Global Affairs Canada should expand efforts to ensure that climate finance mechanisms are accessible to women-led organizations, enterprises, and community initiatives.



This could include:

- incorporating gender-responsive criteria into climate finance instruments,
- supporting dedicated funding windows for women-led initiatives,
- and partnering with local financial institutions to improve access to credit and insurance for women.

Such approaches would strengthen both adaptive capacity and economic resilience at scale.

6.4 Strengthen Linkages Between Community-Level Leadership and Institutional Decision-Making

While women's leadership is often strong at community levels, its influence on national policy and resource allocation remains uneven. Canada should support initiatives that strengthen vertical linkages between local leadership and formal governance structures.

This may include:

- supporting women's participation in disaster risk reduction and climate governance bodies,
- facilitating policy dialogue between community leaders and government institutions,
- and investing in capacity strengthening for public institutions to integrate gender-responsive approaches.

Strengthening these linkages will enhance the sustainability and systemic impact of women's leadership.

6.5 Address Structural Barriers, Including Unpaid Care Work and Social Norms

Efforts to strengthen women's leadership must be accompanied by targeted interventions addressing structural constraints. In particular, unpaid care responsibilities and restrictive social norms continue to limit women's participation in economic and leadership roles.

Global Affairs Canada should prioritize investments in:

- care infrastructure (e.g., childcare, health services),
- social norm change initiatives engaging men and community leaders,
- and programs that strengthen women's decision-making power within households and communities.

These investments are critical enabling conditions for sustained economic participation and leadership.

6.6 Support Data Systems, Evidence Generation, and Accountability Mechanisms

The lack of sex-disaggregated data and gender-responsive monitoring frameworks remains a significant gap. Canada should support the development of data systems that capture women's participation, leadership, and economic contributions in climate and disaster contexts.

This includes:

- investing in data collection and analysis,
- supporting local research and knowledge production,
- and integrating gender indicators into monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Improved data systems will enable more effective policy design and strengthen accountability for gender equality commitments.

6.7 Leverage Partnerships with Canadian and Regional Private Sector Actors

Canada has an opportunity to align private sector engagement with gender-responsive climate and economic objectives. Women-led enterprises are active across sectors critical to resilience, including agriculture, renewable energy, and local supply chains.

Global Affairs Canada should explore partnerships that:

- support women-led businesses and cooperatives,
- strengthen inclusive value chains,
- and connect Canadian private sector actors with local initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.



Such partnerships can contribute to both inclusive economic growth and more resilient regional economies.



Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that women's leadership is a critical, yet underutilized, driver of economic resilience in climate- and disaster-affected contexts across the Indo-Pacific.

Across diverse cases, women's leadership contributes to stabilizing local economies, strengthening adaptive capacity, and shaping governance systems that support more inclusive and effective responses to climate shocks. These contributions are not incidental; they are central to how communities and economies withstand and recover from disruption.

For Canada, this presents both a policy imperative and a strategic opportunity. Advancing women's leadership aligns with Canada's commitments under the Women, Peace and Security agenda and its Indo-Pacific Strategy, while also contributing to broader objectives related to economic resilience, sustainable development, and regional stability.

Realizing this potential will require moving beyond approaches that focus solely on participation, toward those that actively support and institutionalize women's leadership across economic, governance, and social systems.



ANNEX 1 — Cambodia Case Study

Women's Leadership in Agricultural Cooperatives and Climate-Resilient Livelihoods

Implementing Organization(s): Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) with support from Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Local Partner: Organization to Develop Our Villages (ODOV)

Location: Prey Veng Province, Cambodia

Climate and Disaster Context

Prey Veng province is highly vulnerable to climate variability, experiencing prolonged droughts during the dry season and severe flooding during the wet season. These conditions regularly damage rice production, trigger livestock disease outbreaks, and contribute to declining agricultural productivity. Combined with rising input costs and unstable market prices, these climate-related shocks have led to increased household debt, reduced incomes, and heightened food insecurity.

Program Overview

The project focused on improving food security and livelihoods through the establishment of agricultural cooperatives, alongside training in agriculture, aquaculture, nutrition, hygiene, and gender equality. A total of 5,729 participants were engaged, with women representing a majority of direct beneficiaries.

Women's leadership was intentionally integrated into the governance and delivery of the program, with women occupying roles across cooperatives, community structures, and local governance mechanisms.

Women's Leadership Pathways

Women's leadership was developed through structured capacity-building, mentoring, and participation in community forums. Three primary leadership pathways emerged:

Women assumed decision-making roles within agricultural cooperatives, including facilitating meetings, managing financial and operational functions, preparing reports, and representing cooperatives externally. Over time, leadership capacity increased significantly, with women demonstrating greater confidence, coordination abilities, and engagement with external stakeholders. Participation levels, measured through ODOV's leadership assessment tool, increased from 44 percent to 90 percent over the course of the program.

Women also played key roles in Commune Technical Teams, where they acted as local extension leaders. In these roles, women facilitated training sessions, supported household-level food production, monitored progress, and addressed local challenges. Their consistent engagement and high participation rates contributed to sustained knowledge transfer and strengthened local adaptive capacity.

In addition, women strengthened community protection and mediation systems through participation in committees addressing women's and children's affairs. Increased confidence and capacity enabled women to address issues such as domestic violence, conflict mediation, and child protection, while also advocating for community needs within local governance structures.

Economic and Resilience Outcomes

The project contributed to measurable improvements in household income, food security, and dietary diversity. Households increased production of diverse crops, with surplus production generating additional income. Average annual household income from agricultural activities rose significantly, and dietary diversity among women improved to universal levels.



At the institutional level, agricultural cooperatives strengthened their capacity to respond to members' livelihood and food security needs. Women's leadership within these structures ensured that benefits were distributed more equitably and that cooperative services were responsive to local priorities.

Women's leadership also played a direct role in climate adaptation. Women leaders facilitated the adoption of climate-resilient agricultural practices, including crop diversification, soil and water management, and flood-adapted cultivation techniques. These practices reduced vulnerability to climate shocks and supported continuity of production.

At the household level, increased joint decision-making and equitable access to resources created enabling conditions for women's sustained participation in economic and leadership roles. These shifts were associated with improved collaboration, reduced conflict, and strengthened resilience.

Key Insights

This case demonstrates that embedding women's leadership within economic and governance structures can generate both gender equality and economic resilience outcomes. Women-led cooperatives and technical systems function not only as livelihood mechanisms but also as platforms for climate adaptation, knowledge transfer, and community-level resilience.



ANNEX 2 — Vietnam Case Study

Women-Led Financial Systems and Climate-Smart Economic Resilience

Implementing Organization(s): CARE Canada
Location: Ha Giang and Lai Chau Provinces, Vietnam

Climate and Disaster Context

Northern Vietnam faces increasing climate variability, including prolonged droughts, heatwaves, and extreme weather events such as typhoons, flooding, and landslides. These conditions affect agricultural productivity, livestock health, and household livelihoods, particularly in remote and mountainous regions.

Agriculture remains a central economic sector, yet climate-related disruptions have reduced crop quality, increased vulnerability to disease, and created instability in income generation, particularly for rural and ethnic minority populations.

Program Overview

The Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Vietnam (AWEEV) project (2021–2025), funded by Global Affairs Canada, aimed to improve economic well-being for poor rural and ethnic minority women.³³ The program combined support for women's economic participation, leadership development, and social norm change.

Key interventions included financial inclusion through savings and loans groups, technical training in agricultural production and marketing, support for digital sales, and investments in childcare infrastructure. Partnerships with women-led organizations, government institutions, and private sector actors supported implementation and sustainability.

³³ Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Vietnam (AWEEV). (2022, April 13). CARE Canada. <https://care.ca/projects/aweev-advancing-womens-economic-empowerment-in-vietnam/>



Women's Leadership Pathways

Women's leadership was primarily developed through Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), which functioned as both financial mechanisms and leadership platforms. Through these groups, women built financial literacy, gained access to capital, and developed confidence in decision-making and negotiation.

Participation in VSLAs enabled women to transition into broader leadership roles, including initiating women-led enterprises and contributing to cooperative development. Leadership development was further supported through training in entrepreneurship, climate-smart agriculture, and digital marketing.

Women's leadership expanded into community governance, where women facilitated climate risk assessments, promoted adaptive agricultural practices, and engaged in local decision-making processes. Their leadership was rooted in local knowledge and strengthened through peer learning and collective action.

Economic and Resilience Outcomes

The project contributed to significant improvements in women's economic well-being and decision-making power. Women's participation in household economic decisions increased substantially, alongside improved access to and control over economic resources.

Women-led financial systems enabled households to invest in climate-resilient livelihoods, including diversified agricultural production and new income-generating activities. Adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices increased across participating households, contributing to greater resilience to weather variability and market shocks.

Women's leadership also strengthened local governance and community preparedness. Women facilitated climate risk mapping, led disease prevention efforts, and supported the adoption of biosecurity measures, reducing vulnerability to climate-related disruptions.

Importantly, interventions addressing unpaid care work and social norms created enabling conditions for women's sustained participation in economic and leadership roles. Increased male engagement in caregiving responsibilities contributed to more equitable household dynamics and expanded opportunities for women.

Targeted support for women-led businesses led to strategic investment decisions within community economic structures. Women leveraged their local expertise to improve tea crop management, avoiding climate-related loss and implementing new organic farming practices, in congruence with Vietnam's (Ministry of Agriculture and Environment) national 2026 agrobusiness priorities.

Key Insights

This case highlights the importance of integrated approaches that link financial inclusion, leadership development, and climate adaptation. Women-led financial systems serve as critical entry points for broader economic and governance transformations, enabling women to drive resilience at household, community, and value chain levels.



ANNEX 3 — Nepal Case Study

Mentorship-Based Leadership in Climate and Health Resilience

Implementing Organization(s): Nepal Red Cross Society, with support from the Canadian Red Cross

Location: Nawalparasi West District, Nepal

Climate and Disaster Context

Nepal faces increasing climate-related health risks, including floods, heatwaves, and disease outbreaks. These risks disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups, particularly in rural areas where access to services and infrastructure is limited.

Despite their central role in household and community health, women are often excluded from formal leadership and decision-making processes.

Program Overview

The “Building Women’s Leadership as Climate and Health Champions” initiative aims to strengthen women’s leadership in climate-health resilience through a mentorship-driven model. Implemented over a six-month period, the project focuses on building knowledge, skills, and confidence among women at the community level.

The program established three Women’s Climate and Health Groups, engaging 61 women supported by a network of mentors from health, governance, and humanitarian sectors. Activities include training, peer learning, and mentorship, with a focus on climate-resilient health practices and community preparedness.

Women’s Leadership Pathways

Women’s leadership was developed through a layered mentorship model linking experienced leaders with community-level participants. This approach facilitated knowledge transfer, skill development, and confidence-building.

Participants, many of whom had limited formal education or prior leadership experience, were supported to develop expertise in climate-health issues and to act as resource persons within their communities. Women engaged in group discussions, training sessions, and community outreach, gradually taking on leadership roles in local initiatives.

The program also engaged men and community leaders to address gender norms and support women’s leadership, particularly in relation to unpaid care responsibilities.

Economic and Resilience Outcomes

While the primary focus of the project is on climate-health resilience, the initiative contributes to broader resilience outcomes by strengthening community preparedness, improving access to information, and enhancing coordination with local governance structures.

Women reported increased confidence in public speaking, engagement with local authorities, and participation in community decision-making. Several participants began initiating small-scale actions, such as awareness campaigns and community-based climate-health interventions.

The program also includes a component to support women-led innovation through seed funding, with selected participants developing local solutions to climate-health challenges.

Key Insights

This case demonstrates the importance of mentorship and network-based approaches in enabling women’s leadership, particularly among those excluded from formal systems. By positioning women as knowledge holders and community leaders, the initiative strengthens local resilience and creates pathways for broader participation in governance and decision-making.



ANNEX 4 – Examples of Women’s Leadership & Economic Resilience

Annex 4 compiles additional examples of women’s leadership across the Indo-Pacific, including several initiatives spanning disaster response, climate adaptation, and community resilience, with linkages to economic stabilization and recovery across community, policy, and financing levels.

See Excel file entitled “Annex 4_WPSN-C_Adaptive Leadership, Resilient Economies_March 2026.”