

Building resilience by empowering women and girls: highlights from ARA micro-grants

Women and girls are widely recognized as particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts – not due to inherent weaknesses, but because in much of the world, they have fewer assets and less agency and power than men and boys. Without careful attention to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), adaptation processes may unintentionally reinforce those disparities and deepen vulnerabilities.

This is why, from the outset, the ARA has embraced GESI as a core value. The ARA is committed to promoting gender-transformative adaptation research that not only ensures that women and girls can fully participate and benefit, but also tackles systemic inequities, striving to build a world in which discrimination and marginalization no longer exacerbate climate vulnerability.



Women harvesting tea in Assam, India. Photo by Rohit Dey on Unsplash

When the ARA launched its 2023 Grassroots Action Research Micro-grants programme,¹ gender and social inclusion issues featured prominently in several funded projects. To enable a deeper exploration of GESI issues, 9 of the 30 micro-grant recipients later received dedicated micro-grants for GESI activities.

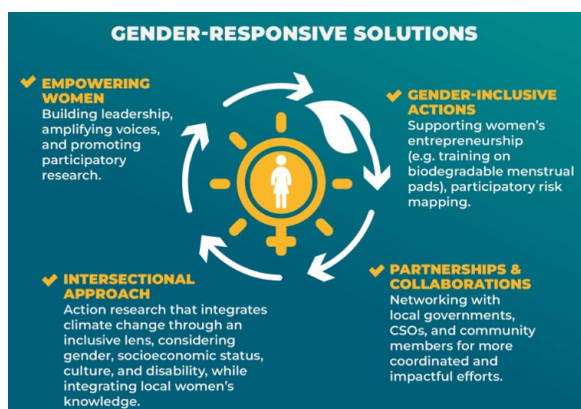
These micro-grants provide valuable examples of adaptation research that challenges gender hierarchies, amplifies voices that are seldom heard, and builds resilience by empowering people and enhancing their capacities. They also highlight key barriers and ways to overcome them – all insights that can help ARA members and others design more effective future interventions.²

Prioritizing women’s health

Climate change impacts, such as extreme heat, saltwater intrusion, freshwater scarcity and flooding, do not affect women and men equally. Not only are women in households without piped water typically responsible for collecting water from the nearest source – a gruelling task when water is scarce – but menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth all increase their physical vulnerability.

Yet social norms, stigmas and limited knowledge can render these challenges invisible and prevent women and girls from getting the support they need to stay healthy. As shown in Figure 1, several projects sought to enhance women’s resilience by breaking through the silence and engaging them in implementing adaptation solutions.

Figure 1. Tackling climate change impacts on women’s health to achieve just and inclusive solutions



In Bangladesh, a project led by the Institute of Sustainable Innovation for Communities targeted women in coastal areas whose health during pregnancy was threatened by the consumption of saline water. It raised awareness of salinity-induced health complications, such as hypertension and (pre-)eclampsia, and introduced a low-cost solar technology to facilitate access to clean drinking water.

Community-led committees and women’s groups provided platforms for inclusive dialogue, decision-making and leadership development, enabling women and youth to advocate for themselves. Still, the project team reported encountering more resistance to change than expected, as gender roles and power dynamics were deeply entrenched.

¹ For an overview, see ARA (2023).

² Unless otherwise noted, the information presented in this report is drawn from Viridia Projects (2024).

SaciWATERs, meanwhile, used its micro-grant to examine the impacts of climate change on women's menstrual and reproductive health in the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest area and the cyclone capital of India (Chourey, 2024). A succession of cyclones, combined with sea-level rise, has devastated the land, degraded water supplies and deepened poverty. A lack of safe water for sanitation and hygiene, limited healthcare access, and a lack of safe menstrual products have led to a high incidence of reproductive health problems, infections, bleeding, cysts and other problems.

However, there is little discussion and awareness of these health issues due to taboos and social stigma, especially about menstruation. To overcome this, SaciWATERs surveyed 400 women in four villages in West Bengal, then organized two workshops in each village to identify practical solutions and began to implement them, tailoring the methodology to overcome cultural and literacy barriers.

The adaptation measures identified include comprehensive menstrual health management, water conservation initiatives, ecosystem-based strategies, and the establishment of early warning systems and community-centred disaster risk reduction plans. Much work remains to be done, but women's enhanced capacities and ongoing partnerships are helping to build resilience.

Visibility and support for persons with disabilities

In Odisha state, in eastern India, the Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre (SMRC), a leading disability rights advocacy organization, used its ARA micro-grant to empower women with disabilities. The project enhanced the women's awareness of climate change and disaster risks, alerted them to available government benefits, such as assistive devices, and how to access them, and brought their concerns to the attention of the state government.

After SMRC shared their recommendations, government officials pledged to implement adaptation measures and to include the community in disaster risk reduction planning. They also committed to establishing a special network for women with disabilities, to provide support for education and employment opportunities.

In Jonglei state, South Sudan, the Humanitarian Development Consortium led a project aimed at protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and empowering them to contribute to raising awareness of disaster risks in their communities, and to participate in vulnerability and capacity assessments and disaster-related decision-making.

The Jonglei project helped to raise awareness among government line ministries of the need to include persons with disabilities in disaster risk management processes, and it also provided tangible support for participants, such as food, shelter materials and assistive devices.

Intersectional approaches

Many projects funded by the micro-grants reported encountering barriers to community members' full participation: from husbands who did not want their wives to speak up or engage in project activities, to women healthcare workers who became quiet when more powerful men were in the room, to cultural norms that devalued the voices and insights of young people.

To overcome these barriers, project teams deliberately reached out to and partnered with women's organizations, timed activities to better align with women's schedules, explicitly encouraged women to speak up and take the lead, and created dedicated spaces for women, young people and others whose voices would otherwise be marginalized to speak up.

A project led by Pad Up Zimbabwe, which focused on ensuring that nature-based enterprises were sustainable and climate-resilient, included a gender assessment that determined that women played a significant role in the harvesting, use and management of natural resources. Women were also excited to have a platform to present their hard work, the project team reported.

The Zimbabwe project took an intersectional approach to identifying barriers to participation and designing targeted measures to address them. For women with disabilities, for example, the team focused on providing accessible and inclusive opportunities within nature-based enterprises. This involved recommending and adapting training materials, infrastructure and support mechanisms to accommodate various abilities.

Older adults were empowered by acknowledging their traditional knowledge and experience and integrating it into the project. Tailored support systems were also set up to help elders with any physical or logistical challenges they might encounter. Young people, meanwhile, were recognized as key agents of change, and the project intensified efforts to create and recommend educational and skill development programmes.

Targeted support for GESI activities

Many project teams reported that disaggregating data and deliberately engaging women, persons with disabilities, youth and other often-marginalized groups had deepened their understanding of the communities and the issues they focused on, sometimes exposing important complexities.

The dedicated GESI micro-grants enabled several project teams to dig deeper into gender and social inclusion issues. For example, in Zambia, the Women's Life and Wellness Foundation (WLWF), which had led a project exploring how farmer-managed seed systems might enhance the food security and resilience of smallholders, used its GESI micro-grant to develop comprehensive social profiles of three wards in Kafue District, a rural area in Lusaka Province.³

Over the course of four days, the Zambia project team interviewed hundreds of people, using a pre-designed questionnaire to explore gender roles and power dynamics, women's aspirations, barriers to social inclusion, and the structure of local economies. The study found that women had strong aspirations for increased participation in decision-making and economic activities, but they faced entrenched systems of male dominance and authority and had limited access to essential resources, such as education, employment opportunities and healthcare, alongside enduring cultural barriers.

In Madagascar, the Tanjona Association, which had led a project on resilience-building in coastal cities in the Boeny region, used its GESI grant to deepen understanding of the challenges faced by women and immigrants in particular, enhance those two groups' capacities to develop and implement their own solutions, and encourage local leaders to mainstream GESI into adaptation planning and policy.⁴

The project included a workshop with local leaders to discuss ways to enhance the climate resilience of women and migrants; support for five women's associations to obtain legal recognition, which would increase their influence; the promotion of a mangrove nursery project led by a local association; and the creation of five short documentaries telling the stories of women in the region and sharing their perspectives on climate change, building resilience, and the importance of women's groups.

Similarly, in Myanmar, Doh Eain, which had led a project focused on building resilience at the grassroots level, working with local communities, used a GESI micro-grant to delve deeper into the challenges faced

³ The description of this project is based on a brief report submitted to the ARA by the WLWF in 2024.

⁴ The description of this project is based on a brief report submitted to the ARA by the Tanjona Association in 2024.

by marginalized communities, including residents of informal settlements.⁵ Doh Eain applied a gender lens to explore nuances in how climate change affects different people within a household, within communities and across locations, and to consider expectations and responsibilities during challenging times. A “storybook” shared some of the perspectives gathered.

In Argentina, where Asociación Civil Apu Kuntur had led a project focused on community-led, nature-based solutions to restore mountain forests in Córdoba that had been destroyed by fire, a GESI grant allowed the project team to shine a spotlight on the role of women in conservation, including through a [video](#), and promote GESI approaches through collaborations between researchers and civil society.⁶

In the Sundarbans, meanwhile, where SaciWATERS had already carried out GESI-focused work – the menstrual health project – a GESI micro-grant supported a second phase of the project (Chourey, 2024), focused on enhanced stakeholder engagement, advocacy efforts, skill development and the production of a 16-minute documentary film, *The Bleeding Tides*. The project team sought to engage a more diverse set of women, including from marginalized groups, and deepened advocacy by engaging stakeholders at the block level.

Another key element of this phase was to provide training sessions for women on how to manufacture affordable, biodegradable sanitary napkins. The goal was to empower women with entrepreneurial skills to create alternative livelihoods and contribute to eradicating period poverty.

Much remains to be done to reduce vulnerability, and the SaciWATERS team developed detailed recommendations for follow-up work, including clinical studies, training women’s self-help groups to gather and maintain health data, mainstreaming menstrual health into primary healthcare, adopting gender-responsive policies, and upgrading infrastructure, among others.

What did we learn?

The work supported by the micro-grants highlighted the importance of fully integrating GESI into the design and implementation of action-oriented adaptation research projects. Without strong GESI integration, research teams are likely to struggle to reach and fully engage women, persons with disabilities, youth and other groups.

As a result, they may not get a complete picture of how people are experiencing climate change, the main drivers of vulnerability or critical needs for adaptation. They may also miss crucial insights and ideas for climate solutions. And to the extent that they lead to the implementation of adaptation measures, those measures may leave the most vulnerable people behind.

At the same time, even the best-designed project can only achieve so much. Cultural norms, power dynamics, marginalization and discrimination are deeply entrenched, and social stigmas and taboos can make it difficult to even speak about certain topics. It takes hard work and persistence to break through these barriers, give voice to those who have been silenced and ignored, and gradually empower them.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships and dialogue are also key; many projects have begun to drive change by engaging government officials, local leaders, NGOs, women’s groups and other partners. Lastly, storytelling is a powerful tool for change. Several of the GESI projects produced videos featuring women’s stories in their own voices, filmed in their communities, that will raise public awareness and help NGOs raise additional funds to support adaptation on the ground.

⁵ The description of this project is based on a brief report submitted to the ARA by Doh Eain in 2024.

⁶ The description of this project is based on a brief report submitted to the ARA by Asociación Civil Apu Kuntur in 2024.

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Image: Mahila Housing Trust (MHT)

This brief was written by Marion Davis, drawing substantially on a report by Viridia Projects that drew on surveys and interviews with project teams as well as on reports submitted to the ARA by recipients of the GESI grants.

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