



# Women Building Resilient Cities in the Context of Climate Change

*Lessons from Freetown, Sierra Leone*

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## Acronyms

<b>CAAP</b>	Community Area Action Planning
<b>CBO</b>	Community-based organization
<b>CDMC</b>	Community-based Disaster Management Committee
<b>CEDAW</b>	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CiLP</b>	City Learning Platform
<b>CoLP</b>	Community Learning Platform
<b>CODOSAHPA</b>	Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation
<b>FCC</b>	Freetown City Council
<b>FEDURP</b>	Federation of Urban and Rural Poor
<b>GEN SL</b>	Global Entrepreneurship Network Sierra Leone
<b>IPCC</b>	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
<b>LDCs</b>	Least Developed Countries
<b>NDCs</b>	Nationally determined contributions
<b>NERC</b>	National Ebola Response Center
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>NOW</b>	National Organization of Women
<b>SDI</b>	Slum Dwellers International
<b>SIPRI</b>	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
<b>SLURC</b>	Sierra Leone Urban Research Center
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNFCCC</b>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

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## Foreword

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The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security promotes the attainment of sustainable peace by advancing women's rights and addressing gender inequalities around the world. The literature on climate change and security recognizes that good governance is essential to absorb climate shocks and mitigate security risks. It also recognizes the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and other marginalized groups as well as the need to include women in formal climate-related decision-making processes. But the literature is scarce on the implications of engaging and empowering women in local governance for climate-related risks, especially in underserved urban contexts where formal governance structures are less reliable.

This research contributes to filling this gap. It identifies how women in local governance increase resilience to climate-related security risks. And it provides insights for policy-makers, peace and development practitioners, and researchers seeking to build long-term, sustainable peace locally, nationally, and globally. Although the outlook for climate-related insecurity is fairly bleak, the in-depth field research on Freetown, Sierra Leone, highlights promising practices to provide transferable lessons and opportunities for building resilience to climate-related security risks.

## Executive Summary

Recent scientific and policy reports paint a bleak picture for the state of the climate. Three years after the Paris Agreement – when global leaders set ambitious targets to combat climate change – 2019 is on record as the second hottest year at 1.1 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, making the past five years the warmest in history.<sup>1</sup> Developing countries in tropical and subtropical climates – most having contributed least to greenhouse gas emissions – are hit the hardest.

At the same time, urbanization is proceeding rapidly, especially in coastal cities in developing countries, often outpacing government capacity to plan for sustainable growth. As a result, informal settlements are expanding into areas highly exposed to hazards, along coastlines or up steep hillsides. Unplanned growth further degrades the environment and makes already fragile ecosystems even less able to withstand climate shocks. In urban contexts, the impacts of climate change are unfolding in highly visible ways. In coastal cities, floods and landslides caused by storms and rising sea level are destroying infrastructure, displacing populations, and weakening livelihoods. For those already living in poverty, these risks pose serious threats to their well-being.

In 2015, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 recognized climate change as an important consideration for the peace and security of women and girls. Women – marginalized in economic, political, and social spheres in many contexts – have even fewer available resources to cope with climate-related disasters as they face unique and often disproportionate risks.

Yet despite the challenges posed by climate change and gender inequality, evidence shows that women are actively contributing to building resilient cities. In urban contexts, women are carving paths to inclusion across multiple levels of local governance and helping communities become safer and more prepared to cope with disasters.

This report distinguishes two key modes of engagement: formal representation, and community-based organizations or civil society networks. Local government shapes how residents experience risk, through providing services such as water or waste management, or planning future land use. In informal settlements, where local government is less reliable, informal structures of organizing can help build resilience, as through designing community-based early warning systems or forming savings cooperatives that allow households to bounce back after a disaster. Interventions from NGOs can fill gaps in service delivery and help link community-based initiative to government planning.

**Urbanization is proceeding rapidly, especially in coastal cities in developing countries, often outpacing government capacity to plan for sustainable growth.**

Field work in Freetown, Sierra Leone, reveals that women engaged in local governance are leading the charge for resilience building. In 2018, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr became the first woman elected as mayor in 40 years. Climate change and

environment have been at the center of her Transform Freetown policy agenda. Her data-driven and participatory approach to governance – setting and measuring clear environmental targets and holding regular consultations with city residents, including in informal settlements – have helped her to gain legitimacy with city residents.

In informal settlements, the Federation for Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP), a women-led network of more than 3,000 people, is providing households with financial security through savings and loans groups. Their members are actively engaged in risk management, training community members on flood and disaster management.

Gender-responsive development projects are contributing to empowering women in decision-making processes and bridging the gap between informal and formal structures of governance. The Pull Slum Pan Pipul project for example (in English, “take the slum from the people”) aims to improve the well-being of residents in informal settlements suffering most from the impacts of climate change. Testimonies from beneficiaries suggest that project interventions improving the livelihoods of women in informal settlements in turn enabled women to engage in decision-making processes in their homes and communities, including those related to disaster risk management.

While the gender narrative for climate-related risks in urban areas has focused on women’s vulnerabilities, this report illustrates that women are also making important contributions to building resilient cities. Its findings point to five key recommendations for policy-makers and development practitioners to empower the voices and actions of women in local governance:

- ① Invest in community-based organizations in informal settlement communities.
- ② Promote collaboration between formal and informal governance bodies.
- ③ Design projects that are climate-responsive and gender-responsive.
- ④ Amplify the voices – and actions – of women change agents.
- ⑤ Conduct gender-responsive data collection in informal settlements.

It is well established that responding to climate-related risks in cities demands the knowledge and capacity of local communities. Urbanization is also marked by a demographic shift, as more women migrate to cities.<sup>2</sup> This situates women at the center of new and emerging risks and makes recognizing not only women’s vulnerabilities but also their contributions to building resilient cities ever more imperative.



## Introduction

There is growing recognition that climate change impacts have important implications for human security. Across the globe, droughts, extreme weather events, and rising sea levels undermine livelihoods, destroy infrastructure, and force people from their homes, threatening the social, economic, environmental, and political well-being of affected communities.

There is also growing momentum to recognize that climate-related human security risks affect women and men in different ways. In 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women passed General Recommendation No. 37 on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change. The recommendation notes that structural inequality based on gender – and intersecting with other dimensions of discrimination (such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion) – can disproportionately expose some women and girls to climate-related risks.<sup>3</sup>

As the earth warms to dangerous temperatures, the demography of the global population is changing. More than half the world's people live in urban areas, a proportion expected to increase to 60 percent by 2030.<sup>4</sup> Most urbanization is now in low- and middle-income countries, with Africa and Asia accounting for more than 90 percent of urban growth.<sup>5</sup> Many expanding cities are in tropical and subtropical zones that already face harsh climatic conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Where governments have only limited capacity and few resources to plan for and respond to climate-related hazards, climate change and urbanization can create a “vicious cycle” if people and assets are concentrated in hazard-prone areas and if people destroy the natural ecosystem that protects the environment and supports local livelihoods.<sup>7</sup> Unplanned urban sprawl into coastal and hillside environments can mean that neighborhoods – typically the poorest – are highly exposed to climate hazards such as rising sea levels, storm surges, heat stress, extreme precipitation, inland and coastal flooding, landslides, water scarcity, and air pollution.<sup>8</sup>

Recognition of the urban impacts of climate hazards has increased in recent years, but little attention has been paid to the experiences of women – especially women living on the cities' margins. An analysis of developing countries with available data found that more than half of urban women live in “slum-like” conditions, defined as having challenges with access to clean water, durable and safe housing, improved sanitation services, or sufficient living areas.<sup>9</sup> In these conditions, people are more vulnerable to climate-related risks that would destroy weak housing structures and limit the availability of clean drinking water.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, gender discrimination in access to resources, labor markets, education, and finance, can mean that women have few resources to recover after disaster strikes.<sup>11</sup>

**Recognition of the urban impacts of climate hazards has increased in recent years, but little attention has been paid to the experiences of women – especially women living on the cities' margins.**

Yet the impacts of climate change are not immutable, nor is gender disadvantage. Building resilience to climate change in the context of rapid urbanization demands solutions that are locally grounded and broadly inclusive. In rapidly growing cities and towns, communities rely on inclusive local governance to adapt to harsher climatic conditions, protect the environment from further degradation, and improve nonenvironmental factors of resilience. This is especially true in countries where few resources are available for “hard” adaptation engineering and national capacity is already stretched to its maximum. In vulnerable communities, such as informal settlements, community-based responses are essential for making households more resilient, just as urban planning is critical for sustainable city growth.

Women can contribute to building resilience and participate in local governance in various ways. There are some examples of how empowering and engaging women in local governance has contributed to building resilience in rural areas, such as through improved livelihoods and natural resource conflict mediation in rural Sudan, especially where the out-migration of men from villages leaves women predominantly responsible for supporting households.<sup>12</sup> But evidence from urban contexts is extremely limited. And the literature addressing the gender, climate, and security nexus has so far focused primarily on differentiated risks faced by women and men, rather than entry points and opportunities for building resilience to climate-related security risks.

This study adds value to what we know by exploring how urban women are engaging in local governance to build resilience to climate-related risks in their communities. Recognizing that in some of the most vulnerable contexts – such as in informal settlements – formal government structures are weak or absent, the study considers how women are taking an active role in informal structures of governance, including civil society networks and community-based organizations.

The research was motivated by three questions:

- ① How do gender dynamics shape climate-related security risks in urban contexts?
- ② How are women in local governance – including formal and informal structures – contributing to alleviating these risks?
- ③ What are the implications for policy-makers, peace and development practitioners, and researchers at local, national, and global levels?

While there is a growing body of literature on the gender dimensions of climate-related security risks in rural contexts as well as the emerging risks and opportunities related to urbanization and climate change, the documented evidence on women’s contributions to resilience building through local governance is scarce, particularly in urban areas. To fill this gap, this research included two main processes. First, we conducted a review of peer reviewed and grey literature to assess evidence on the relationships between climate change and security, climate change and urbanization, gender and climate change, and women in governance vulnerable urban contexts. Second, a case study on Freetown, Sierra Leone documents how women contribute to building resilience in an extremely vulnerable urban environment.



*Woman leader from FEDURP in one of Freetown's hillside settlements.*  
© Molly Kellogg

Sierra Leone was selected given the co-existence of pockets of fragility – or the existence of fragility at a subnational level – with high exposure to climate change impacts and the emerging evidence of women in local governance making important contributions to building resilience. We use the OECD's fragility framework, recognizing that state fragility occurs from the complex interaction between five dimensions: economic, environmental, political, societal, and security.<sup>13</sup> (The full methodology, including selection criteria and process, is in annex 1.) Field research was conducted in Freetown for two weeks in November 2019. The research included semistructured interviews and focus group discussions with 33 key stakeholders, including policy-makers, civil society networks, women leaders, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and observations of environmental challenges during field visits to informal settlements. (A full list of interviews is in annex 2.)



*Poor waste management compounds flood risks from harsh storms and sea level rise in Freetown's informal coastal settlements.*  
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## The Gendered Impacts of Climate Change for the Urban Poor

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Literature on climate change and security, urbanization, gender and poverty, and urban governance provide important insights for understanding how women and men are affected by climate-related risks in cities and towns – and how women are contributing to building resilience. This section briefly reviews the literature in three parts. It first describes the security risks associated with climate change in the context of urbanization. It next examines the gender dimensions of climate-related security risks in rapidly expanding urban areas. It then introduces a conceptual framework to unpack how women engaged in local governance contribute to building resilience to climate-related security risks for the urban poor.

The report uses a comprehensive understanding of security beyond traditional notions of state and power.<sup>14</sup> In urban areas in developing countries, the gender-dimensions of climate-related security risks are often characterized by the extreme poverty and growing inequality, compounded by climate change impacts. A recent report by World Pulse women redefined security as including “financial stability, access to basic needs, community, and much more.”<sup>15</sup> The analysis of the gender-climate–security nexus, we consider the seven dimensions of human insecurity – economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political.<sup>16</sup>

### **Unplanned urban growth in the context of climate change: a worrying trend**

There is a general consensus among policy-makers, academics, and practitioners that climate-related hazards – including droughts, extreme weather events, rainfall fluctuations, extreme temperatures, and sea level rise – can create conditions that reinforce poverty, undermine development, and threaten the various dimensions of human security.

In a 2009 United Nations Secretary General report, climate change is described as a “threat multiplier,” exacerbating risks to human well-being. The threat multiplier concept has been reinforced in academic literature, policy reports, and the media. For instance, the 2014 Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change chapter on Livelihoods and Poverty describes the possibility of “double losers” emerging from “simultaneous exposure to climatic change and other stressors such as the spread of infectious diseases, rapid urbanization, and economic globalization.”<sup>17</sup> The 2015 report commissioned by the members of the G7 “A New Climate for Peace” referred to this interaction as creating “compound climate-fragility risks,” increasing the demand for or strain on the earth’s resources amidst declining availability or reliability.<sup>18</sup>

Yet analyses of climate-related security risks have so far focused primarily on rural areas, such as in the Sahel, where growing resource scarcity and reductions of livelihoods exacerbated by climate change is associated with perpetuating violent conflict – which in turn makes adapting to climate change ever more challenging.<sup>19</sup> In urban areas, however, climate change impacts – and the related security risks – manifest in very different ways.

Urbanization has long been associated with fostering economic prosperity, development, and progress toward gender equality, generating more than 80 percent of global GDP, and offering access to education and jobs unmatched in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> Today, however, cities in developing countries are marked by growing inequalities and the concentration of many new and emerging climate risks, leading several scholars to question whether urbanization and development are still necessarily linked.<sup>21</sup> According to the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC, rapid urbanization has “been accompanied by the rapid growth of highly vulnerable urban communities living in informal settlements, many of which are on land at high risk from extreme weather,” while the expansion of informal settlements into fragile ecosystems further degrades the natural environment.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, climate change impacts in rural communities are expected to intensify rural-urban migration.<sup>23</sup>

In developing regions, 30 percent of the urban population – and 50 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa – reside in informal settlements, living in extremely insecure environments (box 1). And about 90 percent of urban expansion in developing

## BOX 1

### Defining Informal Settlements

Informal settlements are residential areas where tenants are presumed to have no legal claim to the land on which they reside. The most deprived and vulnerable informal settlements – in some contexts referred to as “slums” – are defined by UN Habitat as lacking one or more of the following:

- Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions.
- Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room.
- Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price.
- Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people.
- Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.

The combination of insecure tenure, high exposure to hazards, and inadequate provision of services makes slum communities especially vulnerable to climate change impacts. At the same time, urbanization is rapidly expanding the growth of slums.

Source: UN Habitat glossary.

countries includes informal or unplanned settlements in or near hazard prone areas.<sup>24</sup> An analysis of developing countries with available data found that more than half of urban women live in slum-like conditions.<sup>25</sup>

The vulnerability of informal settlements is underpinned by what is often a precarious relationship with government and infrastructure. Residents' underlying fear of

**The vulnerability of informal settlements is underpinned by what is often a precarious relationship with government and infrastructure.**

eviction makes addressing climate-related security risk for the most vulnerable city residents even more challenging. A sense of impermanence linked to a lack of land tenure makes investing in permanent, safe infrastructure difficult to justify for residents and governments alike. In some cases, climate change impacts or environmental degradation have been used to justify the relocation of residents from informal communities, or slum clearance, a worry that can lead residents of informal settlements to downplay environmental hazards in their communities.<sup>26</sup>

In cities and towns where governments lack the capacity to provide adequate social safety nets to manage the compound impacts of climate change, urbanization, and underdevelopment, the urban poor— with the worst infrastructure, the most limited access to information, and the least able to move out of harm's way — are the most vulnerable to risks of flooding, sea level rise, storm surges.

## **Gendered experiences of climate-related risks in urban areas**

Climate change affects everyone, but not equally. The degree to which individuals or communities are impacted by climate-related security risks — or their vulnerability to them — is a product of both their exposure to environmental hazards (such as storms, cyclones, or sea level rise) and their adaptive capacity (ability to anticipate, absorb, and recover from such shocks).

Their adaptive capacity depends on a range of social, economic, political, or cultural factors that determine, for example, how people access information, their ability to move away from an ensuing disaster, the security of their dwellings, or their available savings to recover from a crisis. Moser et al. use an “asset adaptation framework” to illustrate that those with more and diverse assets are better able to prevent, respond to, or recover from the impacts of climate-related shocks.<sup>27</sup>

Gender norms play an important role in shaping urban women and men's vulnerability as prevailing inequalities can limit women's available assets, and thus their “options and capacities to cope with climate variability.”<sup>28</sup> Alber presents five factors of gender equality as relevant for understanding and addressing climate change in urban areas: gender bias in power and decision-making, gender division of labor, gender differentials in income and assets, gender roles and cultural patterns, sex-related factors, and physical differences of women and men.<sup>29</sup> In most cities, women are responsible for a disproportionate share of the unpaid work, often managing resources that are affected by climate change, such as water or food. Water shortages or disasters increase women's time burdens on water collection, exposing them to other possible risks, including gender-based violence.<sup>30</sup>

Similar factors are presented by Chant and McIlwaine in the “urban-slum interface,” a framework outlining the dimensions of gender inequality in slums, where vulnerabilities are even more pronounced as women are poorer, have less education, have more limited access to information, and more constrained mobility.<sup>31</sup> Recognizing that conditions in informal settlements vary significantly across regions, the authors argue that “archetypal shelter deprivations” in slums create highly gendered conditions, as women’s domestic responsibilities in cities and towns across the globe often mean that the home plays an essential role in how women negotiate daily life.<sup>32</sup> They include climate change as a cross-cutting issue with the potential to exacerbate inequalities across the various dimensions, including through the destruction of inadequate infrastructure.

Women’s vulnerabilities can also be affected by cultural practices, such as “constraints of access to information and education, and restrictions of personal, social and economic activities outside the home.”<sup>33</sup> The 2020 World Social Report, produced by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), notes that domestic duties limit women’s “social networks and access to information – especially since women use communication tools such as mobile phones less often than men.”<sup>34</sup> Early warnings for disasters or weather events are thus less likely to reach women, and even if informed, their ability to migrate may be restricted. Alber provides an example from the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, where the death rate for women (71/1,000) far surpassed that of men (15/1,000), with reports stating that flood warnings did not reach women.<sup>35</sup>

In the public realm, structural inequalities constrain women – especially poor women – from building resilience to climate-related risks in their communities. Chant and McIlwaine argue that women are “frequently underrepresented in formal political structures in urban areas, including trade unions, cooperatives, and workers’ associations, which marginalize and invisibilize” their roles.<sup>36</sup>

Through her analyses of an informal settlements in Bangladesh, first in Dhaka (2014) and later in Khulna City (2019), Jabeen finds that women, who are more constrained from accessing public spaces, are in turn excluded from decision-making processes and economic structures that shape resilience.<sup>37</sup> She argues that “understanding the power to take action is significant in assessing climate resilience and the capacity of individuals or communities to cope with hazards and maintain the potential for adaptation.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Engaging women in local governance to build urban resilience**

**“Many aspects of adaptation can be implemented only through what urban governments do, encourage, allow, support, and control.”**

**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014<sup>39</sup>**

There is growing recognition that governance – and particularly local governance – plays an essential role in shaping people’s resilience to climate-risks.<sup>40</sup>

According to Agarwal et. al, local institutions shape the effects of climate hazards in three key ways. First, they are responsible for the provision of public services





*Effective waste management is critical for decreasing the risk of flooding in crowded urban communities in the Philippines.*  
© Adam Cohn on Flickr

including water, sanitation, drainage, and housing construction and improvement. Second, they provide the framework for individuals and households to choose means of adaptation. This is dependent on institutional norms and structures around labor, access to economic markets and capital, and security of land tenure. Third, they shape recovery in post-disaster situations, by determining the “direction, effectiveness and allocation of external assistance.”<sup>41</sup>

World Bank guidance on urban adaptation emphasizes working across multiple dimensions of governance to build resilient cities. There are examples of community-based adaptation, such as in slums, where communities have designed low-cost drainage for storm water or created networks for early warning systems. City governments are key for urban planning and long-term sustainable development. NGOs and local organizations fill crucial gaps in service provision or livelihood development.<sup>42</sup>

Women’s engagement in local governance structures is crucial to ensure that climate and development policies address women’s specific needs and harness their knowledge and capacities. Women’s responsibilities in their households and communities create a unique vantage point for both understanding natural resource management and addressing the underlying causes of poverty. Women – like men – also possess their own networks of communication, mobilization, and action. Women’s leadership in local governance can thus contribute to developing solutions that bring in new perspectives, more effectively address gender-differentiated risks associated with climate change impacts, and expand networks for

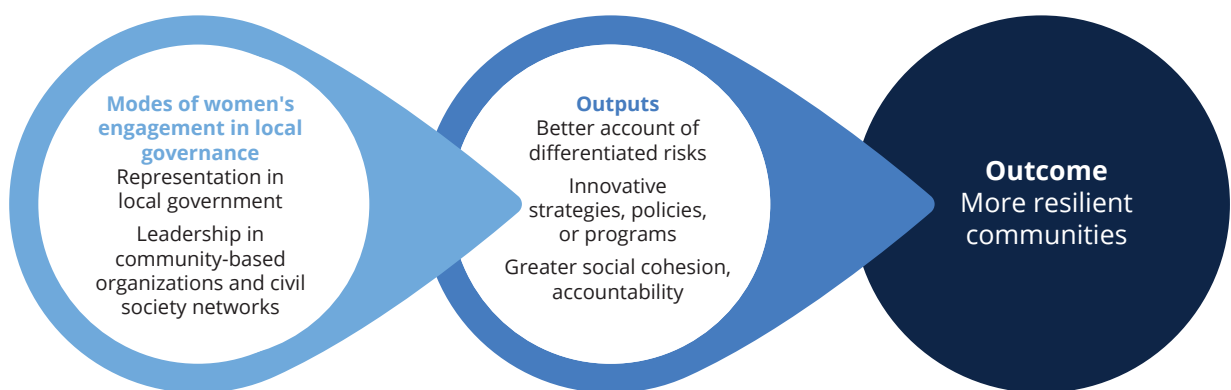
communication. Women’s engagement in local governance, more generally, is an essential contribution to overcoming structural gender inequality.

Women’s role in addressing climate-related risks through local governance is less visible in the literature, especially in developing countries. However, examples of other types of development projects or initiatives spearheaded by women in city governments or communities in different types of urban spaces – cities, small towns, urbanizing corridors – illustrate that women leaders are making important contributions to building resilience. There are also examples of climate and environmental action proving an effective entry point to promote the participation of women in leadership and decision-making.

Two key modes for women to engage in local governance are government representation and community-based organizations and civil society networks (figure 1). The two “modes of engagement” are explored further below. While systematic evidence of the impacts of women’s participation does not exist, promising practices suggest that women’s engagement across different levels of governance contributes to improving accounts of gender-differentiated risks, designing innovative strategies, policies, or programs, and contributing to greater social cohesion and accountability.

At the international and national levels, some tools exist to measure women’s contributions to relevant decision-making processes and monitor progress. The Environment and Gender Information (EGI) platform from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) monitors women’s participation and representation in international climate change debates and key provisions for gender in national and international climate and environment policies. The Gender Climate Tracker of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization compiles key national policies and decisions related to gender and the environment. Considering women’s roles in formal and informal structures of governance outlined provides a useful lens to assess women’s participation in climate action at local levels.

**Figure 1: The potential roles of women in local governance to building urban resilience to climate-related security risks**



### **Representation in local government**

Formal representation in local government is the first mode of engagement for women's participation in local governance. City government policies and programs determine several "hard" and "soft" factors that shape the resilience of communities in urban centers, including the quality of infrastructure (such as drainage systems) and land use management, disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, availability of safe low-income housing, and civil society engagement.<sup>43</sup>

In developing countries – where the impacts of climate change are felt the most – local city governments tend to prioritize risk adaptation – improving city planning and infrastructure – rather than mitigating climate change.<sup>44</sup> However, local governments are often stretched for resources and capacity to act effectively on their own. More than two-thirds of 468 cities around the world surveyed by US-based NGO ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability reported they are engaged in some level of climate adaptation planning, but only 18 percent are implementing plans.<sup>45</sup>

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Women are still vastly underrepresented in local government. According to the UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019, women's representation in elected local government across more than 100 countries stands at a median of 26 percent. Women's representation in local government is 40 percent or higher in only 15 countries and areas.<sup>46</sup>

While this gender gap in decision-making power persists, women have been prominent actors in key climate response initiatives. For example, women represent 20 percent of C40 mayors, a group of mayors spanning from Freetown, Sierra Leone, to New York City committed to accelerating climate action in their cities. Women4Climate, an initiative started by the C40 group of female mayors, has spearheaded a mentorship program to engage the "next generation of women climate leaders."<sup>47</sup>

The impact of women in local office on climate and environmental policy in developing countries warrants more research, but studies from the United States suggest that women elected to local office are more likely than men to vote for environmental protection<sup>48</sup> and adopt more stringent climate policies.<sup>49</sup>

### **Community-based organizations and civil society networks**

In developing countries, governments often lack the financial assets or capacity to implement the "full range of infrastructure and services needed for resilience"<sup>50</sup> and informal settlements are often neglected. So, household and community-based approaches to adaptation are important options to respond to risk.<sup>51</sup> These organizations also play a key role in local governance by advocating for and representing the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, enhancing public engagement, and ensuring local government accountability and transparency.<sup>52</sup>

In several documented cases, residents in informal settlements have engaged in resilience building. For example, households have created physical barriers to prevent the intrusion of water in Lagos, Nigeria, Ahmedabad, India, and Kampala, Uganda. And community networks in Accra, Ghana, and Jakarta, Indonesia, developed early warning system plans to move to safer areas in case of flooding.<sup>53</sup>



*Women community leaders play key roles in shaping urban resilience to climate-related risks in India.  
@ Prashanth Pinha on Unsplash*

There are examples of women playing a leading role. For instance, women-led community-based saving schemes operate in informal settlements across 32 countries coordinated by Slum Dwellers International (SDI). Having networks women-led is intentional. According to SDI, “by targeting the poorest women in a settlement, one can be sure that the settlement’s most vital needs will be addressed.”<sup>54</sup>

In Uganda, the National Slum Dwellers Federation, a member of SDI with close to 93,000 members in 2014, has several activities to build urban resilience to shocks, including those from climate change. These include producing *matoke* briquettes, a low-carbon, alternative fuel source that reuses waste, investing in lower cost and environmentally sustainable building materials, and spearheading initiatives to provide clean water and improve drainage.<sup>55</sup>

In the Philippines, women founded a network of community-based women’s organizations – Damayan ng Maralitang Pilipinong Api (DAMPA) – in response to the 1995 massive demolitions of homes in Smokey Mountain settlement. Operating in densely populated, disaster-prone areas, the network protects “hundreds of urban poor families in desperate need of adequate basic services and social protection.”<sup>56</sup> DAMPA has secured housing tenure for thousands of urban poor families, improved sanitation facilities, and increased access to community pharmacies in informal settlements.<sup>57</sup>

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) implementing development and resilience-building projects in a gender-responsive way can support community-based organizations or civil society to achieve their objectives. In some cases, support is top-down, enabling improved community-based action. For example, the Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT)

supports women in urban informal settlements across India by improving water and sanitation, livelihoods, land rights, housing, and access to finance, and seeks to link women's leadership through these initiatives to advocacy and greater participation and influence in local governance.<sup>58</sup>

In other examples, community-based initiatives partner with an NGO to increase legitimacy or support. The Huairou Commission is a global coalition of women's grassroots networks empowering female leaders and developing resilient communities. The Commission and its partner, Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) International, channels flexible funding to grassroots women's organizations in disaster-prone communities through its Community Resilience Fund.<sup>59</sup> The fund operates in over 18 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Similarly the Slum Women's Initiative for Development (SWID) emerged from a mobilization of grassroots women against unjust evictions in the slums of Jinja, Uganda. It now campaigns for women's access to resources and security of tenure in urban and rural slums, as well as climate change adaptation.<sup>60</sup> It has advocated for municipal governments to upgrade settlements and basic services and supported hundreds of women in securing property rights and land titles.<sup>61</sup>

#### ***Inclusive governance for climate-resilient cities***

The most effective governance strategies build inclusive structures that allow local government and community-based organizations and civil society networks to work together toward risk mitigation and adaptation. Informal settlements require investments from local government to improve infrastructure and land management, while local government needs community buy-in to legitimize policy and planning processes. NGOs can play an important role in enabling such partnerships.

In Nepal, the Lumanti Support Group for Shelter mobilizes low-income slum communities to organize secure housing and basic services, including upgrading settlement infrastructure, improving water and sanitation systems, and developing community-led finance mechanisms.<sup>62</sup> In 2009, Lumanti initiated a dialogue between a local women's led cooperative and the Ministry of Home Affairs responsible for implementing the national disaster management strategy in local communities. This engagement had a catalytic affect, as new disaster guidelines directed local governments to form local committees including community-based organizations to implement local disaster risk management. "Traditionally, grassroots women's development work and leadership have tended to go unrecognized by governmental bodies" but this new partnership created "a place at the table for local communities and women's grassroots constituencies in local agenda-setting bodies."<sup>63</sup>

**Informal settlements require investments from local government to improve infrastructure and land management, while local government needs community buy-in to legitimize policy and planning processes."**

As illustrated by Lumanti's success, engaging women's networks can open new avenues for upgrading communities most vulnerable to climate-related risks. And climate and environmental action can be a key entry point to enhance the participation of women in local governance structures, a goal in itself.

The following section turns to the case of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

## Women Building Urban Resilience in Freetown, Sierra Leone

This section examines the ways that women engaged local governance across the two modes just outlined are contributing to building resilience to climate-related security risks in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone has made notable development gains following a decade of civil war (1991–2002) and the world’s deadliest Ebola outbreak (2014–2015), but it now faces an environmental crisis intensified by climate change.<sup>64</sup>

In Freetown, the capital, rapid urbanization, environmental degradation, and the impacts of climate change pose immediate – and dire – threats to residents of informal settlements. Sierra Leone stands out in a recent USAID climate-fragility assessment as the only country with its entire population living in high exposure areas to climate change,<sup>65</sup> facing impacts from higher temperatures, heavier rainfalls, and rising sea levels.<sup>66</sup> Combined with demographic, economic, political, and social pressures, climate change is resulting in declines in food security, the spread of disease, decline in water quality, and loss of productive assets from disasters.<sup>67</sup>

The Freetown City Council has referred to the situation as an “environmental time-bomb” where “unabated deforestation, coastal river bed constructions, and land reclamation have created a perfect recipe for flooding and landslides.”<sup>68</sup>

Despite barriers to gender equality and women’s political participation, women in Freetown are taking an active role in building local resilience. In 2018, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr successfully campaigned for mayor on an environmental platform, the first woman elected to this position in more than 40 years. In informal settlements, women organized through community-based organizations and civil society networks are working to improve their resilience through savings and loans schemes and community-based early warning systems. NGOs and development projects with a strong gender-responsive approach are supporting and enabling inclusive governance processes, producing co-benefits for resilience building and women’s empowerment.

This case study is grounded in field research, including interviews and focus group discussions with 33 key stakeholders representing local government, civil society organizations, NGOs, and women leaders. While it cannot measure impact of recent local initiatives, it can document how women are engaged in local governance and civil society.

After a brief overview of the development, climate change, and urbanization landscape in Freetown and Sierra Leone more broadly, this section describes how women engaged in local governance through two modes (formal representation and civil society organizations and networks) are contributing to building resilience. It ends with a discussion of lessons, including key gaps and challenges.

## Context

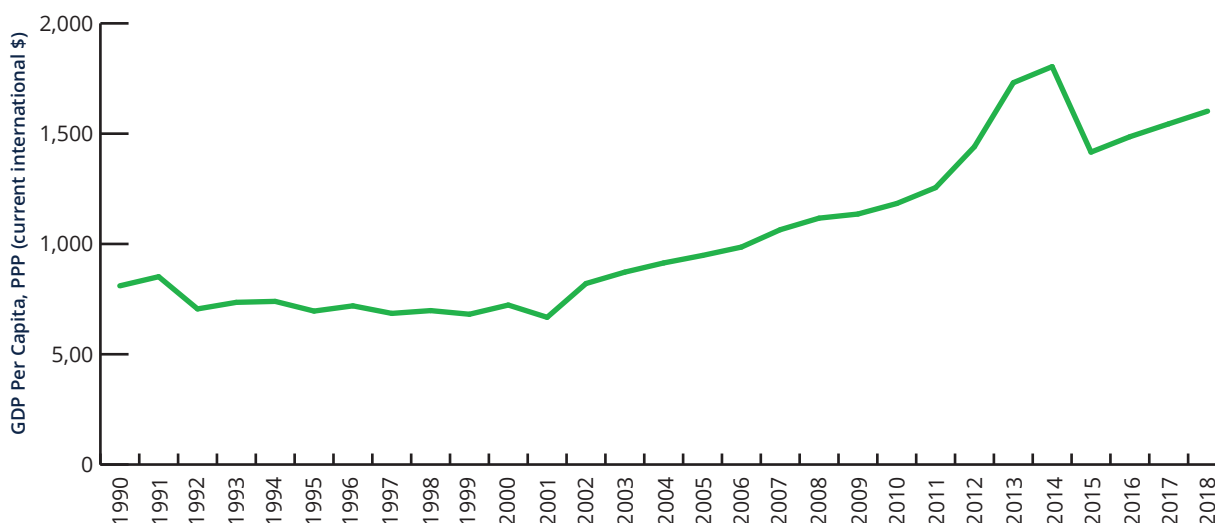
Sierra Leone was devastated by 11 years of civil war from 1991 to 2002, when many people migrated to towns and cities seeking safety.<sup>69</sup> With brutal atrocities, mass rape, and the abduction of children, the war killed an estimated 70,000 people and displaced 2.6 million of the country's 6.8 million people.<sup>70</sup> Sierra Leone's human development indicators were among the worst in the world. Life expectancy fell to 34.5 years in 2005 (from 42 years in 1990) and maternal mortality was estimated at 1,760 per 100,000 live births.<sup>71</sup>

Women and girls were "specifically targeted and subjected to systematic gender-based violence including rape, sexual slavery, forced marriages, unwanted pregnancies, forced labor, and detentions."<sup>72</sup> An estimated 250,000 women and girls were raped, and hundreds of women and men were mutilated.<sup>73</sup>

Since the war, Sierra Leone has been lauded as a successful post-conflict story by the United Nations and World Bank for its peaceful transition, and has not been considered a fragile state since 2011.<sup>74</sup> There have been several peaceful transfers of power through national elections, and economic growth has been steady.<sup>75</sup>

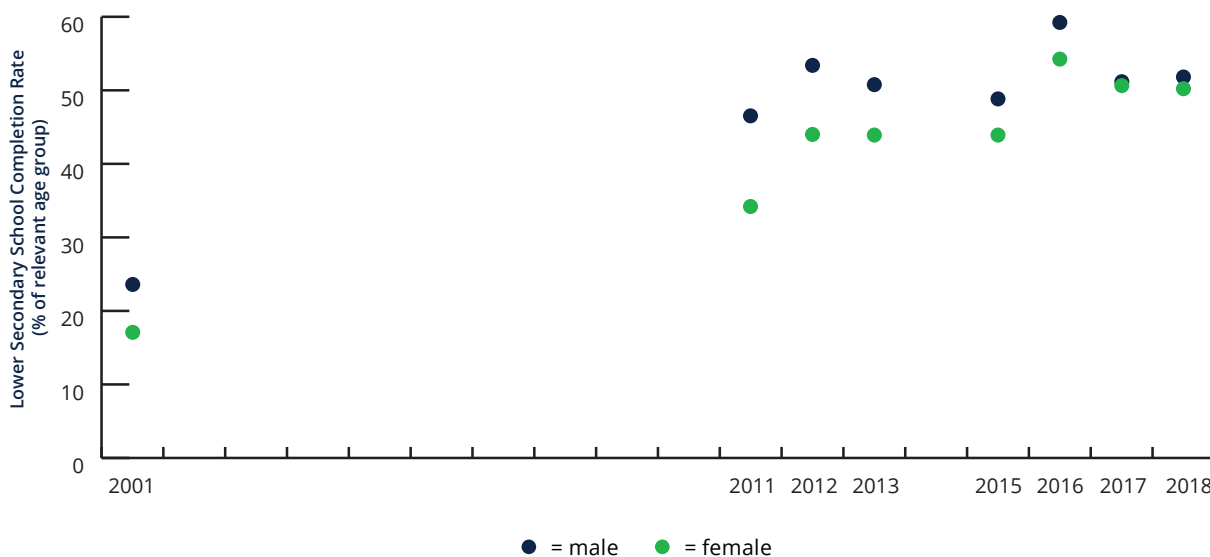
Women have been key contributors to post-conflict development, as many women's groups and organizations emerged in the wake of the civil war. Women have secured several important legislative actions, including three Justice Acts in 2007 around domestic violence and marriage, and in 2012, the Parliament passed the Sexual Offenses Bill into law.<sup>76</sup> Sierra Leone has developed and monitored a national action plan on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, and women's groups have pursued a 50/50 campaign promoting the inclusion of women in public office and lobbying for land reform.<sup>77</sup>

**Figure 2: Sierra Leone's GDP has nearly doubled since 2002**



Source: Adapted from World Bank Development Indicators.

**Figure 3: Lower secondary school completion in Sierra Leone is now more than 50 percent, and gender gaps are closing**



Source: Adapted from World Bank Development Indicators.

Among the development gains, income per capita has nearly doubled since 2002, and secondary education has steadily improved (figures 2 and 3).

Yet even in the absence of violent conflict, the situation remains very difficult. Sierra Leone still falls at the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI), ranking 181 of 189 countries in 2019.<sup>78</sup> More than a third of the urban population lives below both the poverty line, and Sierra Leone’s maternal mortality is still among the worst in the world, at 1,120 per 100,000 live births in 2017.<sup>79</sup>

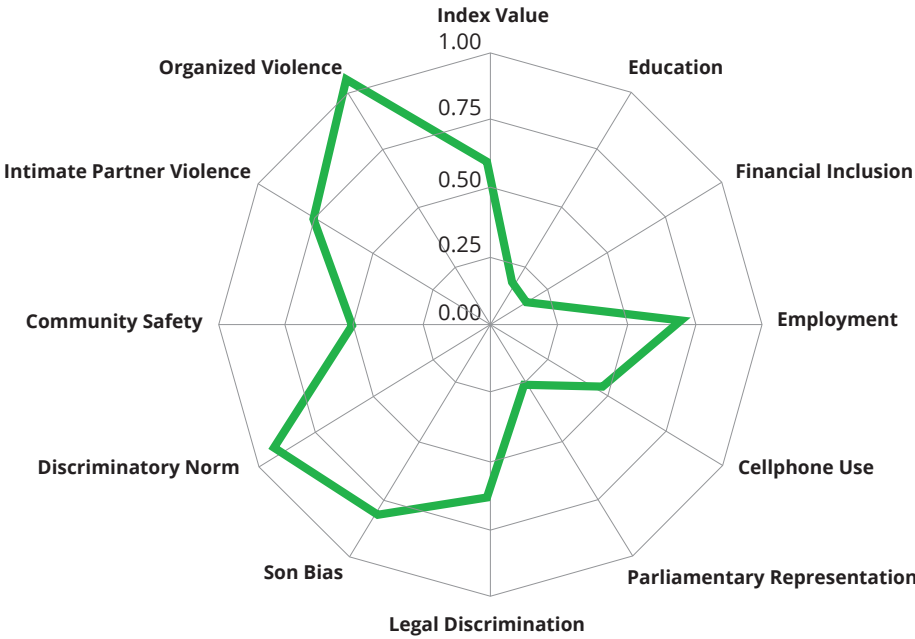
Women in Sierra Leone face significant disadvantages, especially poor women residing in informal settlements or rural communities. The country ranks 153 of 167 countries in the Women Peace and Security Index (figure 3). Women held just 12 percent of parliamentary seats in 2019 and had completed fewer than three years of schooling on average.<sup>80</sup> In 2018, only about one third of women were literate, compared with more than half of men (figure 6). Women rarely control or own land, especially in rural areas, where land tenure is based on customary law.<sup>81</sup>

Sexual violence is still pervasive. In December 2019, President Julius Maada Bio declared a “rape and sexual violence national emergency,” on the basis of hundreds of rape cases reported each month with 70 percent of survivors under the age of 15, and “thousands more” unreported cases.<sup>82</sup>

The prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence was acknowledged in interviews with Sierra Leonean women leaders. One research participant – a professional educator and former school principal – is combating it by training teachers and students on the rights of women and girls through workshops and drama. In

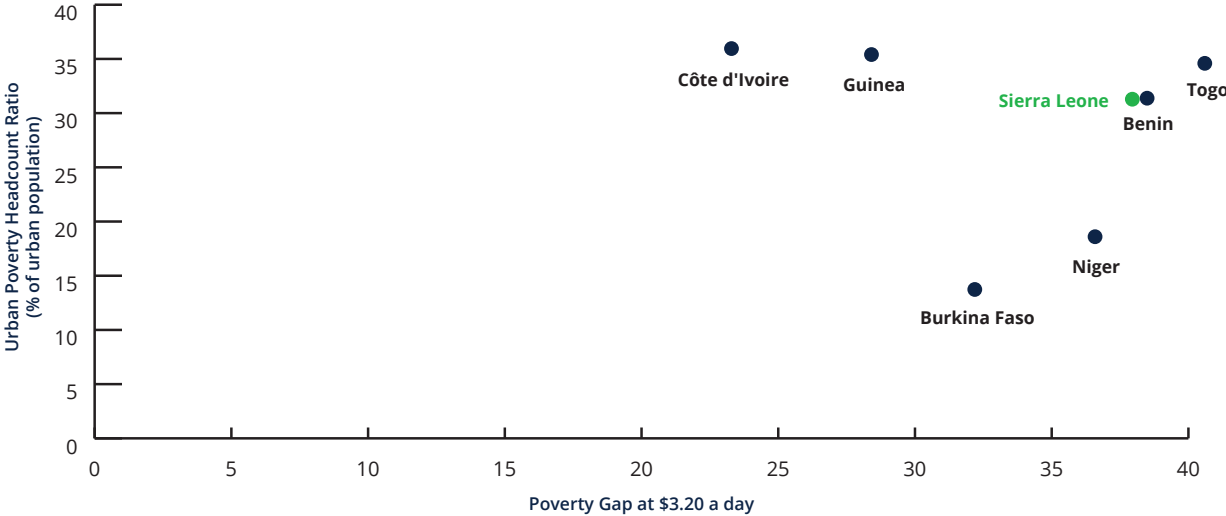


**Figure 4: Sierra Leone ranks 153 of 167 countries on the WPS Index**



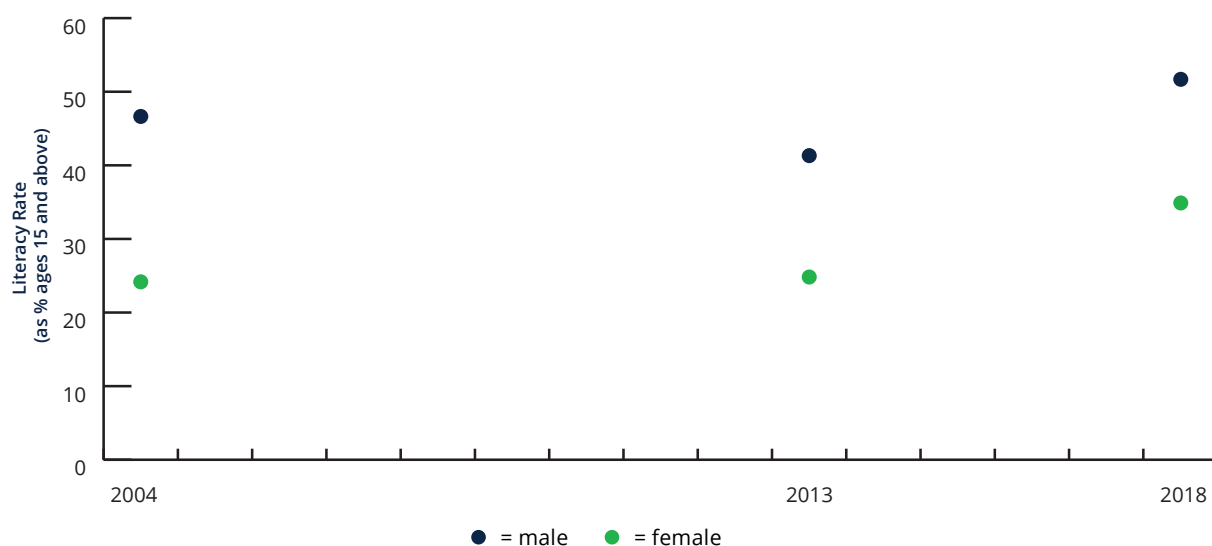
Source: Women, Peace, and Security Index 2019/20, GIWPS and PRIO.

**Figure 5: Sierra Leone experiences higher poverty gaps and urban poverty than neighboring West African countries**



Source: Adapted from World Bank World Development Indicators.

**Figure 6: The gender gap in literacy remains large**



Source: Adapted from World Bank World Development Indicators.

an interview, she noted, “violence is still perpetrated on women. I want to believe that if we continue [our work], maybe it will reach a time when people will say ‘let me have a conscience and stop what I am doing.’”<sup>83</sup>

The situation was already challenging when Sierra Leone faced multiple crises that threatened to stall – or even reverse – its development gains. Between 2014 and 2016, Sierra Leone was at the heart of the world’s largest ever Ebola outbreak, with more than 14,000 recorded cases and nearly 4,000 deaths, including in densely populated urban areas.<sup>84</sup> The outbreak exposed both the limited capacity of the health sector to respond to the emergency and the vulnerability of people living in informal human settlements.<sup>85</sup> Working with local leaders and traditional governance structures proved key to building the trust to control the spread of disease.

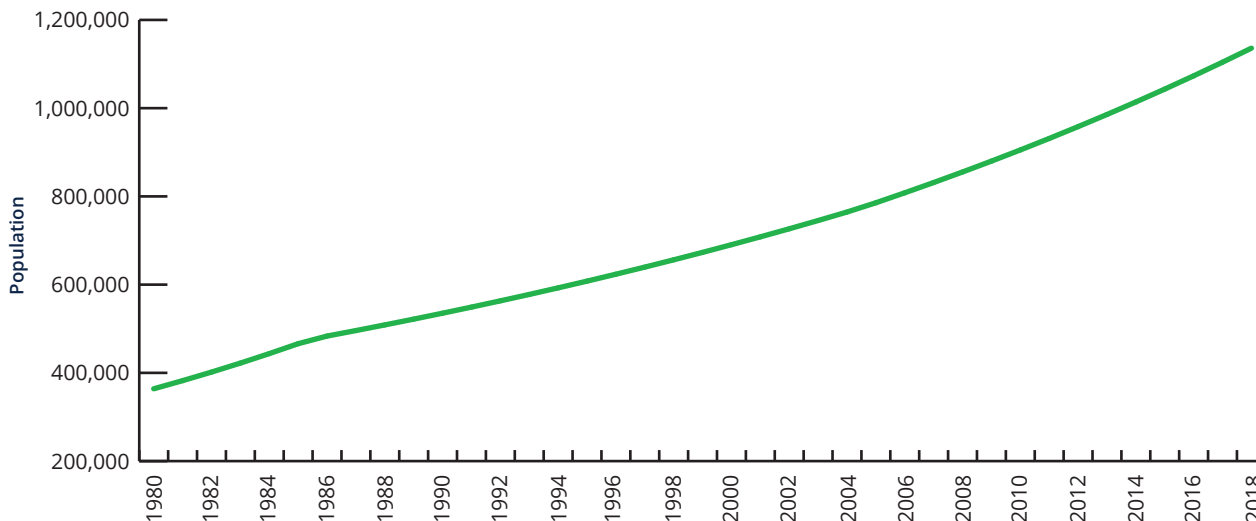
### ***Urbanization with climate change***

Sierra Leone is urbanizing rapidly.<sup>86</sup> Freetown, the country’s largest city, has grown tenfold since Sierra Leone’s independence in 1961, and from roughly 400,000 in 1980 to almost 1,200,000 in 2018 (figure 7).

The city’s topography – surrounded by the Atlantic coast on one side and steep hills on the other – limits the corridor for sustainable growth.<sup>87</sup> The rapid growth, lack of planning, and limited area have expanded informal settlements into hazardous areas, along the coastline and into the hillsides.<sup>88</sup> Livelihood practices like producing charcoal and mining stone and sand have contributed to rapid deforestation, mangrove destruction, and hillside erosion.

Heavier, harsher rains, rising sea-levels, and poor infrastructure put residents of overcrowded settlements in precarious living conditions. In 2017, more than 1,000 people were killed in the Sugarloaf Mountain mudslide on the outskirts of Freetown and more mudslides and floods have occurred since.<sup>89</sup> In 2019, floods displaced 2,000 people in Freetown – primarily from informal settlements – and 11 people died.<sup>90</sup>

**Figure 7: Freetown’s population has almost doubled over the last 20 years**



Source: Adapted from World Bank World Development Indicators.

Floods and landslides create a host of risks for affected communities beyond the destruction of homes. As the Freetown City Council noted in 2014, “when flooding occurs, sanitation, storm-water drainage, and sewage disposal systems are often disrupted and public health threatened as waterborne diseases, such as diarrhea and dysentery increase... disasters destroy household livelihoods for the most vulnerable populations and response demands significant resources from the government.”<sup>91</sup>

During the field research in Freetown, nearly all key stakeholders interviewed noted that climate-related crises impact women disproportionately more than men. The already marginalized status of women and girls, their traditional household responsibilities, and Sierra Leone’s history of sexual violence expose them to specific risks. Women spend more time in the home and have less access to information.<sup>92</sup> In informal settlements, there are reports of young girls being exploited for sex in return for water by men controlling water wells during water shortages.<sup>93</sup> In an interview, Dr. Nana Pratt, a prominent Sierra Leonean woman leader, noted that water shortages are resulting in women and children searching for water late at night. “Some areas get water at 11 or 12 at night, and the girls go out to fetch it. That’s an opportunity for them to be raped. In other words, they are more exposed to the ravages of the effects of climate change and the consequences of disaster.”<sup>94</sup>

**“Climate change causes a lot of insecurity. It is exacerbating insecurity, and it is reversing whatever gains we have made in development. Who suffers when there is a reversal in growth, in development, or in economic opportunities? Women suffer.”**

**Dr. Nana Pratt, National Organization of Women, Sierra Leone**

The recognition of gender-differentiated risks is an important first step for designing and delivering gender-responsive interventions. But few stakeholders recognized



*Sea level rise and flooding from harsh storms threaten Freetown's coastal informal settlements.*  
© Molly Kellogg

the important contributions women are already making in resilience building and the potential power of enhancing inclusive governance. The absence of women in leadership positions risks reinforcing the “women as victims” narrative and missing opportunities to capture the knowledge and capacities of those most hit by climate change in designing policy and programs.

However, examples of women in leadership from field findings narrate some promising outlooks.

### **Women's Engagement in Local Governance**

Despite the many challenges, women are carving paths to inclusion in local governance and helping communities mitigate or adapt to climate-related security risks. This study was not able to fully assess the impact of women's representation in local government or through community-based organizations and civil society networks on making communities more resilient to climate-related risks. But the findings suggest that climate and environmental action can be powerful entry points for engaging and empowering women in local governance structures. They also suggest that women in local governance are activating new networks for action and designing approaches to resilience building that better account for gender-differentiated risks.

### **Representation in local government**

Women are largely excluded from government in Sierra Leone, holding only 12.3 percent of seats in the national parliament,<sup>95</sup> and in 2019 accounting for only 3 of 22 local council heads.<sup>96</sup> Members of parliament and women leaders in Sierra Leone have campaigned for years for a 30 percent quota in parliament, but this has not yet come to fruition.<sup>97</sup> Limited resources – including access to finance, education, and status – inhibit women’s political representation.<sup>98</sup> Compounding this challenge are gender norms and subjugated social positions, which not only affect women’s willingness to participate in politics, but “also the willingness of the largely male political elites and the broader Sierra Leonean’s society acceptance of a woman as a capable political leader,” according to Rogers.<sup>99</sup> Recognizing and addressing climate-related and environmental issues can provide an entry point to engage women in decision-making processes. The 2018 elections marked a milestone in Freetown, with the election of Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr. Climate change and the environment were central to her campaign message and policy agenda, as she vowed to “transform” the city of Freetown into a safe, productive, and sustainable landscape, responding to the multiple and interlinked crises facing the city.

The mayor has since gained global recognition for her progressive environmental agenda, bringing Freetown into an international movement of cities taking the lead on climate action. Her pragmatic local approaches to environmental change and her cooperation with civil society have also helped her gain legitimacy in informal settlements. Measuring the impact of the Transform Freetown Agenda is difficult just one year after its initiation. But several key initiatives stand out as “promising practices” for women in local government seeking to build climate-resilient communities.

### **Set – and implement – a resilience building agenda**

Mayor Aki-Sawyerr and her administration have developed – and started to implement – an agenda targeting infrastructural, regulatory, and behavioral change to reduce environmental and climate-related risks.

The recognition that the environmental crisis is the central risk – as well as opportunity – for sustainable development has shaped the Freetown City Council’s agenda since 2018. Environmental management is the first of 11 priority sectors identified and mapped out through a consultative process that included 310 consultations covering the city’s 48 wards, speaking with more than 15,000 community members including groups representing women and youth, as well as religious groups and other community stakeholders.<sup>100</sup> Other priorities include urban planning and housing, revenue mobilization, health, water, sanitation, education, skill development, job creation, disabilities, and urban mobility. These priorities were validated during ward meetings, in which participants rated the quality of service delivery in each of the sectors. The results were stark – the average service delivery score of 2.74 out of 10 demonstrated the extent of the challenges ahead.<sup>101</sup>

**“The climate message is really powerful because it was really showing people the statistics, the numbers – very few people are actually aware of the climate emergency we’re in. They’re just struggling to live. But even in struggling to live, they can be contributing to worsening the situation.”**

**Mayor Aki-Sawyerr**

**“I think every resident in the city, if you ask what’s the mayor passionate about, they’ll say sanitation. More so than the environment because people relate more closely to the waste management that’s in their face, but like I said earlier it’s all connected.”**

**Mayor Aki-Sawyerr**

poorly disposed trash blocks water drainage systems and enables flooding and the spread of disease. Early projects include clearing blocked drains in flood-prone areas, while investing in improved systems, infrastructure, and regulation for waste disposal. One project equipped 800 youth with business skills and tricycles to collect household waste across Freetown. The project set a 10 percent gender quota for participation by women. This low quota is arguably a missed opportunity to challenge traditional gender norms and deliver co-benefits for women’s empowerment and community resilience building. Even so, by June 2019, 364 solid and liquid waste service providers had been registered on a new Freetown City Council web app, which allowed residents to identify and use certified waste collectors in their communities, setting the path for eventual regulatory change mandating proper solid waste disposal.<sup>102</sup>

In an interview, Abu Conteh, an urban health research officer with the Sierra Leone Urban Research Center, noted that Freetown City Council’s efforts are promising, creating both incentive and motivation for residents to dispose of their waste properly. However, extreme poverty in informal settlements remains pervasive, and if people cannot afford to dispose of their waste through regulated means, they will do so informally. More resources are needed to support clean waste disposal, especially in Freetown’s most vulnerable neighborhoods.<sup>103</sup>

The first year evaluation of the Transform Freetown Agenda, in January 2020, reported that “flooding in 2019 was visibly reduced” in Freetown.<sup>104</sup> But in August 2019, torrential rains and flooding destroyed the livelihoods of more than 5,000 people, with informal settlements hit hardest, underlining the depth and severity of the challenges to be addressed.<sup>105</sup>

#### *Use a people-centered approach to city planning*

Lessons from the Ebola response informed the Transform Freetown Agenda. Improved sanitation and environmental protection for risk management requires behavioral change and ownership by the affected communities. The mayor’s approach to setting priorities has been community-led and bottom up, helping her secure community buy-in and legitimacy. More than 500 community members were trained to facilitate zonal level consultations, including in informal settlements, to identify risks and opportunities and serve as a baseline for city planning.<sup>106</sup> In her words, it is important to facilitate community engagement “in such a way that you can actually monitor what’s happening – which goes back to your data and how you structure engagement. So, structure engagement in a way where you can see the results.”<sup>107</sup>

Ongoing community engagement has been a central element of the Council’s strategy following initial consultations. The mayor opened new lines of communication, as through social media including Facebook and Twitter, established and “open door

policy,” and engaged with communities through regular visits and walkabouts.<sup>108</sup> Other activities include the City Learning Platform, a regular face-to-face meeting that brings together a range of stakeholders, including the mayor, civil society networks, local NGOs and CBOs, and others, initiated under the previous mayor.<sup>109</sup>

Respondents from several local civil society networks and local NGOs confirmed that the mayor’s community-based approach has indeed made her a welcome partner for sustainable development. In a focus group discussion with the Center of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation, participants agreed their relationship between civil society organizations in the informal settlements and the Freetown City Council is mutually reinforcing and strong (see civil society engagement below).<sup>110</sup>

**“That experience of Ebola response and the power that I saw when communities decided that they were going to change something – that’s what’s really influenced the approach that I’m taking.”**

**Mayor Aki-Sawyers**

#### *Create innovation spaces for women and youth*

Recognizing the important role of women and young people in driving new ideas to mitigate or adapt to the impacts of climate change, the Council is pursuing various programs to create spaces for innovation, some of which can be interlinked.

- *Women4Climate*: In November, 2019 Freetown became C40 Cities’ newest member, joining a network of 93 cities committed to addressing climate change.<sup>111</sup> Women4Climate, an initiative of C40 Cities, is a mentorship program for women with ideas for ways to address the climate crisis in their city. It was launched by mayor Aki-Sawyers in Freetown in August 2019, though no results have been reported to date. The mentorship is ongoing in 16 cities, including Addis Ababa and Freetown.
- *Pitch Night*: The Council partners with Pitch Night, a space for budding entrepreneurs to pitch their business ideas to a broad and diverse Sierra Leonean audience.<sup>112</sup> It is managed by Global Entrepreneurship Network Sierra Leone, a platform for entrepreneurs in 170 countries which, among other things, links entrepreneurs to incubator programs.<sup>113</sup> In 2019, founders of supported start-ups were primarily youth ranging from 22 to 35 years of age, 40 percent of them women.<sup>114</sup>
- *Cleanest Zone Competition*: The Council launched the competition in Freetown in October 2018, judging zones for their progress in cleanliness, beautification, sustainability, and innovative solutions. Success is rewarded with such prizes as solar-powered street lights, water points, paved roads, and education scholarships. The competition – inspired by a national cleaning day in Sierra Leone – aims to motivate residents to start caring about the sanitation and cleanliness of their communities. The [www.findmeinfreetown.com](http://www.findmeinfreetown.com) web app allows residents to identify their ward and zone, connect with their local councilors and offices, and identify waste collectors in their neighborhood.<sup>115</sup> Women are central to enabling behavioral change in households and communities levels, especially as it relates to waste disposal.

**“We are helping women find their voice and find their space.”**

**Mayor Aki Sawyers**

### ***Community-based organizations and civil society networks***

Women are also engaged in civil society groups and networks promoting community-based adaptation in informal settlements. The Federation for Urban and Rural Poor (FEDURP) is a volunteer network of more than 3,000 individuals from Freetown's informal settlements, 60 percent of them women, implementing initiatives to build inclusive and resilient communities.<sup>116</sup> Activities include forming savings groups, collecting data in informal settlements, implementing disaster-risk-reduction strategies such as flood and fire community preparedness, and collaborating with city government to advocate for community-led processes.

**“We want women to take active roles in community planning rather than being beneficiaries.”**

### **FEDURP woman leader**

Together, the organizations have a common mission to “empower urban poor communities to improve their social, economic, and environmental conditions by creating spaces and opportunities through collaborative actions to champion their own transformative and development agenda.”<sup>117</sup> The Federation is a member of the global Slum Dwellers International network, committed to empowering the urban poor. It has spearheaded several initiatives that provide promising practices for increasing the resilience of the urban poor.

The Federation is supported by a partner NGO – the Center of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation – which provides technical support and bridges the gap between government and community.

### ***Build economic resilience and social cohesion***

Each settlement community in Freetown where the network is active has 10 to 15 savings groups, which are represented in a community network to encourage experience sharing across groups. Each corresponding ward has a committee, which includes four representatives from each local network, including the community disaster management committee (CDMC) representative, because disasters are considered the primary threat to informal settlements. A board oversees the collective action of the Federation made up by the “mother of the federation” elected by members to provide direction and guidance, the chairman, and the vice chair (see figure 8).<sup>118</sup>

Savings and loan groups have two core functions. First, they provide some financial security for poor households. In a meeting with FEDURP women leaders, participants introduced themselves using their title in their community savings groups. Several noted how the savings groups have helped them live a more secure life, saving to start a new business or to care for their children. One member noted that she is now self-reliant and does not need to request the help of her husband when she needs money. The members emphasized the importance of privacy, “letting a secret be a secret.” This protects individuals who might otherwise turn to unsafe practices to borrow money that could expose them to blackmail, sexual exploitation, or abuse. “With savings groups, you can resolve your problems privately.”<sup>119</sup> Savings groups have sometimes protected money earned by women from being lost during an environmental disaster. All savings groups have a bank account where finances are kept. In some previous floods, money kept in affected homes was entirely lost.<sup>120</sup>

Second, savings and loan groups can build social cohesion and mobilize people to engage in such resilience building activities as community-led disaster risk planning,



data collection, and advocacy. “Savings brings people together and gives people an opportunity to discuss their lives and dialogue about slum issues,” a FEDURP woman leader noted.<sup>121</sup> For example, one woman leader reflected on the savings groups being a stepping stone to working with other communities across Freetown through data collection.<sup>122</sup> Others described opportunities to travel outside of Sierra Leone to meet with slum dwellers in Nigeria, Uganda, or Kenya as part of a cross border exchange.<sup>123</sup> These initiatives not only allow for the exchange of ideas, but empower women with public speaking skills, critical for community organizing and advocacy.

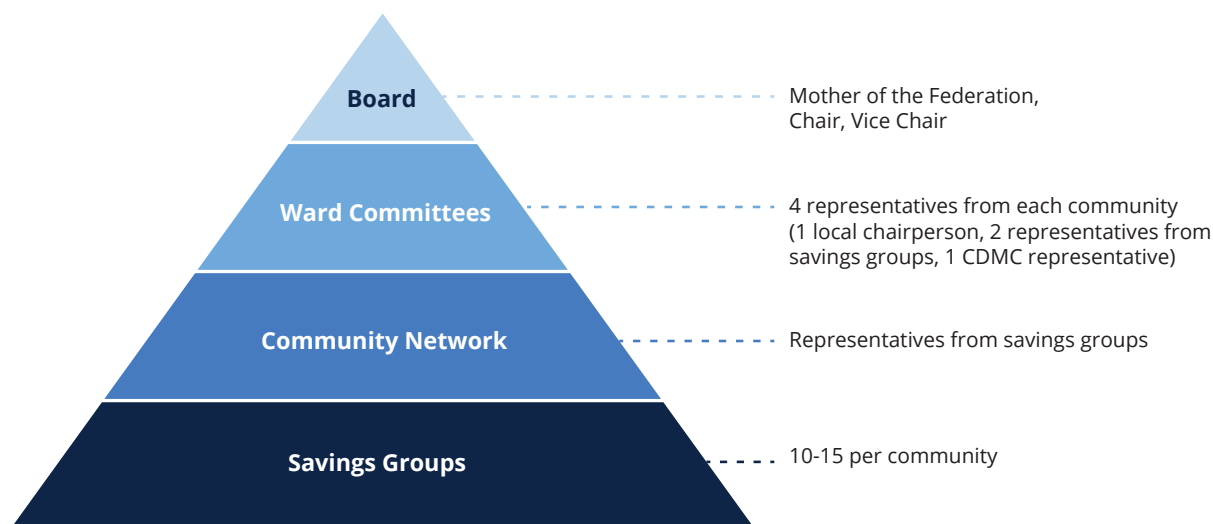
**“When women come together, the men can stand for us.”**

**FEDURP woman leader**

NGOs operating in informal settlements provide funding and capacity to community-based organizations and civil society networks, and can bridge the gap between government and informal settlements. When a gender-responsive approach is implemented, such projects can promote improved governance, women’s empowerment, and climate-reliance.

The Pull Slum Pan Pipul project (in English, pull the slum from the people) aims to improve the living conditions for people living in slums rather than evicting residents from their homes. The five-year project (2014–2019), funded by Comic Relief, was implemented by a consortium of five locally based NGOs with complementary expertise: Restless Development, the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA), Youth Development Movement, the Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSA), and BRAC Sierra Leone. Project initiatives range from increasing awareness of sexual and gender-based violence to improving the livelihoods of women and young people across eight communities covered by Restless Development – to providing water and sanitation infrastructure by the YMCA. Other examples include the projects funded by the Green Environment Faculty Small Grants Program, which supports women-led organization with small grants to start climate-resilient projects (primarily in rural areas), and emergency relief and disaster preparedness projects of the Sierra Leone Red Cross.<sup>124</sup>

**Figure 8: Structure of the Federation for Urban and Rural Poor**



Systematic evidence of impacts in women’s empowerment is not available, though anecdotes suggest that community-based development can promote women’s empowerment. For example, a YMCA project evaluation described how providing livelihood skills training to one woman – who had lost everything in 2015 floods, and again in 2017 – enabled her to engage in decision-making in her household and in her community. “Nothing happens in the community without my knowledge, because I belong somewhere now.” She now takes an active role in disaster management and in training others in her community on how to protect themselves, along with an active community development role.<sup>125</sup>

#### *Identify and plan for community risk*

The slogan “information is power” illustrates FEDURP’s approach to community development.<sup>126</sup> Data collection and risk management plans have been key FEDURP initiatives. Many communities have a data committee responsible for data collection, including administering household surveys in Freetown’s slums to identify available services, risks, attitudes, and to map boundaries. Data are published on the Know Your City platform, a global initiative of Slum Dwellers International which aims to capture knowledge of the urban poor.<sup>127</sup> In February 2020, data were available for 41 slum communities. Published data include a map, brief history of the community, and relevant information on seven topics (table 1).

Table 1, adapted from the Know Your City platform, shows the available information for Susan’s Bay last updated in 2016, one of the oldest and largest settlements in Freetown. The quality of published data across settlements varies, with some settlements featuring information in only one or two categories.

Data are used by the FEDURP community disaster management committee (CDMC), responsible for conducting local risk assessments and implementing risk mitigation strategies.<sup>128</sup> In the words of one CDMC representative, “we are the problems and we are the solutions,” as community members are best equipped to identify their own risks.<sup>129</sup> CDMCs develop zonal community action plans to respond to local risks, including flooding, fires, or possible landslides. In a focus group discussion with FEDURP women members, one CDMC member described her role as teaching community members how to extinguish fires and to protect their homes and assets when it’s raining.<sup>130</sup>

Locally based NGOs also contribute to improving data and knowledge in Freetown’s most vulnerable neighborhoods, often partnering directly with community-based networks and organizations such as FEDURP.

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Center, a knowledge hub based at Njala University in Freetown, aims to enhance the well-being of residents of informal settlements across Sierra Leone by building the capacity of urban stakeholders and generating bottom-up knowledge to ensure that development priorities are “seen through a community lens.”<sup>131</sup>

Founded through a partnership between Njala University and the University College London, the Center has 13 staff (including five women) who conduct research across five priority sectors: urban health, urban livelihoods and the city economy, urban vulnerability and resilience, land and housing, and urban mobility. It publishes briefs targeting policy-makers and practitioners, reports on longer researcher initiatives, and summaries of lessons from city and community workshops and meetings. It also

publishes videos and podcasts featuring conversations with researchers and local community members and dialogues on key research findings.<sup>132</sup>

The Center uses research and data to amplify the voices of the urban poor and link community-based initiatives to government. For example, in 2019, it published a report on the role of community action area planning (CAAP) in expanding the participatory capabilities of the urban poor. CAAP uses a special design and local community structures to empower communities with the tools to plan locally.<sup>133</sup> The Center brought together FEDURP's ongoing work profiling and community planning

**Table 1: Know Your City platform data on Susan's Bay settlement in Freetown**

<b>Settlement: Susan's Bay</b>	
<b>Established</b>	1800
<b>History</b>	During the repatriation of the free slaves from Europe, the white man who accompanied the slaves had his own wife called Susan. They settled along the coast and named the settlement Susan's Bay. Later, other people began to settle in the community as coastal traders.
<b>Basic information</b>	<b>Prioritized development needs:</b> water drainage <b>Ownership of land:</b> 100% municipality <b>Estimated population:</b> 12,500 <b>Population density:</b> 962 people per acre <b>Status:</b> declared, legal, protected <b>Estimated number of structures:</b> 954 <b>Area size:</b> 13 acre
<b>Sanitation</b>	<b>Working toilet seats to people:</b> 1:781
<b>Water</b>	<b>Number of taps:</b> 9 <b>Working taps to people:</b> 1:1,389 <b>Average cost of access per month:</b> 30 SLL
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<b>Electricity available:</b> yes <b>Garbage collections per week:</b> n/a <b>Garbage location:</b> common area inside settlement <b>Road types:</b> dirt paths <b>Main means of transport:</b> bus, walking, taxi
<b>Organized community</b>	<b>Number of savings groups:</b> 5 <b>Community leadership:</b> yes <b>How often does the community meet:</b> monthly <b>Relationship with authorities:</b> good <b>How often does the community meet with the city:</b> monthly
<b>Health access</b>	<b>Most common diseases:</b> malaria, typhoid, cold, diarrhea <b>Access to health clinics:</b> yes <b>Average walking time to nearest health clinic:</b> 10 minutes
<b>Commercial establishments and facilities</b>	Furniture shops, informal markets, mosques, churches, communications

Source: Adapted from Know Your City, Slum Dwellers International. [www.knowyourcity.info/settlement/1860/1689700](http://www.knowyourcity.info/settlement/1860/1689700)



*FEDURP women's meeting.*  
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and the government's ambition to plan and upgrade Freetown's neighborhoods through a formal process detailed in the Freetown Structure Plan (2013–2028). The Center's report features findings from its implementation of CAAP in two informal settlements, illustrative of its action-oriented approach to research, producing informative findings and imparting new skills to communities.

The CAAP process met community members' aspirations by allowing them to acquire knowledge and skills. It expanded their knowledge of risks and opportunities of the places they live. It enabled forming and strengthening social bonds among residents. It facilitated mapping and identifying areas of interest for further research. And it provided key principles that can be applied beyond the timeframe of the CAAP process.<sup>134</sup>

Structures established through the Center's community-based research initiatives are thus designed to live on beyond the scope of the project. The steering committees established during the CAAP process in the two settlements expanded into community learning platforms, which feed into the city learning platform where the Center brings together key actors in government (including the mayor), community-based organizations (like FEDURP), and other NGOs for regular dialogue on city planning. About 10 community learning platforms have been established in various settlements, which are required to be gender-balanced.<sup>135</sup> The Center's issue briefs act as background for the city learning platform meetings.

A 2019 external evaluation of the Center identified gender as an area needing work, both in recruiting staff and mainstreaming it in research projects.<sup>136</sup> But several reports show the Center has a gender-sensitive approach to research. In a report on urban livelihoods, differences between men and women in employment, time use, skills, and responsibilities were integral to the research. It found that women on average spent more hours of their day working on household tasks (about four hours) compared with men (about 30 minutes) and “therefore had significantly longer working days.”<sup>137</sup>

**“We continue to privilege those that are left out in terms of decisions making. If we don’t give them a voice, nothing works for them.”**

**Dr. Joseph M. Macarthy, Executive Director of the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre**

#### *Collaborate with city government*

Underlying fears of evictions remain pervasive across informal settlements. This fear can deter residents from improving their housing or infrastructure or talking about how they are experiencing climate-related risks.<sup>138</sup> This will prove to be a central challenge in the coming phase of Transform Freetown, as emerging plans include relocating communities residing in some of the most environmentally insecure settlements.<sup>139</sup>

The Federation of Urban and Rural Poor and the Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation work to collectively to advocate for pro-poor policies that “take the slum from the people and not the people from the slum.”<sup>140</sup> “When possible, we upgrade. When necessary, we relocate.”<sup>141</sup> They see partnership with the government as critical in protecting poor residents and improving their communities. NGOs play a critical role in enabling this process. For example, through the Pull Slum Pan Pipul project, NGOs have pressed local government to prevent the eviction of slum dwellers from their land. In 2014, in response to an initiative to relocate people from informal settlements, two partners engaged the City Council to advocate for policies that developed the informal settlements rather than remove their residents. They brought the mayor of Freetown to Uganda and South Africa to learn what other governments were doing to support people living in slum communities. Participants in a focus group discussion from Restless Development called this engagement one of their biggest successes, as residents were not evicted.<sup>142</sup>

### **Lessons from Freetown, Sierra Leone**

The people of Sierra Leone live in one of the world’s poorest countries, which now faces even greater challenges with climate change. In the wake of a long and brutal civil war, Ebola devastated the country in 2014. Three years later, the Sugarloaf Mountain landslide took the lives of more than 1,000 people and caused extreme flooding in Freetown.

Today rapid urbanization combined with the impacts of climate change pose new threats to the city’s residents. Those living in rapidly expanding informal settlements are the most exposed to flooding and landslides, and the least able to adapt. Poor women, already marginalized due to pervasive and structural gender inequality, are arguably the worst affected.

Yet as this case has demonstrated, women are actively participating in local governance, contributing to change that helps communities become more resilient to climate-related security risks. Climate change and environmental issues have been a unifying factor for women and men across the city and have provided an important platform for engaging women in decision-making. Through various modes of engagement, women are shaping a more inclusive model of governance, where formal structures and informal structures are mutually reinforcing and supportive rather than competitive. The most positive examples emerge where actors from local governance collaborate across multiple levels.

However, more investment, knowledge, and support are needed, especially in informal settlements, where extreme poverty limits residents' capacity to engage in resilience-building initiatives. There is an urgent need for investing in policies and programs that integrate gender equality goals, climate adaptation, and development.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Urban centers in developing countries are expanding rapidly, including into hazardous areas which both exacerbates environmental degradation and exposes the poorest residents to extreme climate hazards. Women's marginalization in political structures and in access to assets like education, finance, and land tenure – coupled with their care responsibilities – can disproportionately expose them to risks.

At the same time, women's participation in local governance is key for designing and implementing gender-responsive solutions to addressing climate-related risks and overcoming structural inequalities.

**Women's participation in local governance is key for designing and implementing gender-responsive solutions to addressing climate-related risks and overcoming structural inequalities.”**

This study outlined several modes through which women are engaging in local decision-making: representation in local government and through community-based organizations and civil society networks.

Women's networks and contributions can pave the way for more inclusive, people-centered, pro-poor, gender-responsive climate action. As is evident in Freetown, a more inclusive form of governance is helping to better account for differentiated climate-related risks, spark innovative strategies, policies and programs, and promote greater social cohesion and accountability.

While the impact of women in local governance – and the suggested framework – merit further examination, five recommendations emerge for policy-makers, practitioners, and donors seeking to empower and engage women in local governance for climate action.

### **Invest in community-based organizations in informal settlement communities**

In the absence of formal government capacity or resources, civil society networks and community-based organizations can do much to promote community-based adaptation through risk management, improve economic well-being, build social cohesion, and advocate for people-centered policies. In informal settlements, local networks and organizations are often the only form of functioning governance. Women often play an important role in these networks, but they often lack formal recognition, are under-supported, and have a complicated relationship with government. Because climate action demands solutions that can change behavior, community-based networks and organizations are critical partners for building resilience.

### **Promote collaboration between formal and informal governance institutions**

In urban centers with expanding informal settlements, the best solutions emerge when formal and informal governance structures collaborate. Community-based adaptation is limited – informal structures do not have the capacity to invest in structure change or regulate future development. And a government approach that partners with community actors is more likely to be considered legitimate and effective. The leadership of women in this process can help promote solutions that are gender-responsive, innovative, and people-centered.

### **Design projects that are climate-responsive and gender-responsive**

Climate action in urban areas presents an opportunity not only to respond to specific risks and needs of women, but also to promote women's leadership. This opportunity is often missed or overlooked because the narrative of women as victims remains prominent. But projects that promote women's participation and leadership – such as in developing early warning systems or promoting sustainable livelihoods – can create co-benefits for women's empowerment and climate action.

### **Amplify the voices – and actions – of women change agents**

Women's contributions to improving the well-being of poor urban communities remain under-recognized, especially in informal settlements. The framework in this report can be further developed to assess women's participation at different levels of local governance and monitor progress. This requires additional investment, including developing a set of indicators that integrate the multiple dimensions of climate change, gender inequality, urbanization, and human security. Monitoring – and amplifying – the actions of women in local governance will contribute to reframing the narrative of vulnerability and direct support to women change agents.

### **Collect and analyze gender-responsive data in informal settlements**

Several community-based organizations and NGOs are making noteworthy contributions to enumeration and data collection in informal settlements. But in many cities up-to-date, gender-disaggregated data is still virtually nonexistent. Data are essential to accurately identify risks, plan resilience-building strategies, and measure success. Data can improve legitimacy and promote community level buy-in.



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## Annex 1: Methodology

### Background and rationale

A state's ability to absorb climate shocks depends on the capacity of its institutions to meet the basic needs of its citizens and its ability to maintain constructive relationships with them. Fragile situations occur when a state, society, or community has insufficient capacity to cope with its exposure to risk. Such situations can lead to instability, violence, and other forms of physical, economic, social, and political insecurity.

Good governance requires broad participation (including women) to increase local ownership and capture knowledge of diverse experiences. Women are half the population and experience climate-related risks in unique ways. Their knowledge, leadership, and networks are critical to addressing climate-related risks, especially at local levels.

### Research question

- How can engaging and empowering women and other marginalized groups in local governance strengthen the resilience of states and societies to climate and fragility risks?
- How do gender dynamics shape climate-related security risks in urban contexts?
- How are women in local governance – including formal and informal structures – contributing to alleviating these risks?
- What are the implications for policy-makers, peace, development practitioners, and researchers at local, national, and global levels?

### Literature review

The author conducted a review of the academic and grey literature on gender, climate change, urbanization, governance, and security, including journal articles, policy reports, program documents, and global and national commitments and frameworks. The terms listed below were reviewed in pairs.

- Gender and climate change: How is conflict/fragility considered? Where are the knowledge gaps?
- Climate change and security: How is gender considered? Where are the knowledge gaps?
- Gender and security/peacebuilding: How is climate change/ environment considered?
- Climate change and urbanization: What are the compound risks associated with climate change and urbanization?

- Gender and urbanization: What are the gender dynamics in rapidly urbanizing environments? How is governance considered in the literature?

## Case study

The author used qualitative methods to develop an in-depth country case study to identify the climate-security challenge using a gender lens in climate-vulnerable context – and explore good practices of empowering women in local governance to address climate-related and environmental challenges or to mitigate conflict. Good practices are drawn from gender-responsive programming addressing environmental challenges or peacebuilding and political participation.

Sierra Leone was selected for the case study using the following criteria:

1. Vulnerable to climate shocks.
2. Fragile, conflict or post-conflict affected state.
3. Fills a “geographic gap” – limited existing literature on gender, climate, and security exists.

Sierra Leone is considered a peacebuilding success story, but the impacts of civil war have had lasting impacts. These include: weakened institutions (as evident in the Ebola response), high levels of gender inequality, extreme poverty, and rapid urbanization (in the aftermath of the war and due to limited development in rural areas), and environmental degradation. These risks are exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

Key stakeholders were selected to participate in semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions, including representatives from government, private sector, international organizations, civil society organizations, women’s groups, and women leaders. Key stakeholders were recruited by email or through word of mouth using the GIWPS network and a network the author developed through a mapping of civil society organizations, key government institutions, and international organizations engaged in at least two of the following themes: gender equality, natural resource management, climate adaptation, peace and security, and local governance.

A written consent form was provided to the subjects and read aloud prior to interviews. When possible, the written consent form was provided no less than 48 hours prior to an interview via email by the study Investigator, Molly Kellogg. In some cases, the consent process took place on the day prior – or in unique circumstances – on the day of an interview in cases, for example, where subjects do not have regular access to email or are difficult to reach. In all circumstances, to ensure the absence of coercion or undue influence, Molly Kellogg also obtained verbal consent prior to initiating the interview.

All interviews were held in English, Sierra Leone’s official language. However, if interviewees were more comfortable speaking in Krio, translation was made available by a locally recruited translator. In these cases, the translation was live.

## Annex 2: Interviewees and FDG Participants

Haja Mariama Fofana	Vice president of the Eminent Women Peace Mediators	50/50
Francis Reffell	Founder and Director	CODOSAPA
Julia Fofanah	Sierra Leone Country Manager	Conservation Alliance
Simon Okoth	Urban Resilience Programme Manager	CRS
Abdul Bah	Senior Environment Officer	Environmental Protection Agency
Yirah Conteh	Chairman	FEDURP
Federation members		FEDURP
Dr. Samuel Mabikke	Land Tenure Officer	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Dr. Reymond Johnson	Director of Geography Department	Frabay College
Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr	Mayor of Freetown Municipality	Freetown City Council
Sinnehs Mansaray	Asst. Director Response	Government of Sierra Leone, Office of National Security, Office of the President
Rosaline M'Carthy	Mano River Women Peace Network	Mano River Women Peace Network
Mohammed Orman Bangura	Minister of Youth Affairs	Ministry of Youth
Daniel Sesay	Senior Program Officer	Namati
Princess Kawa	Member	NOW



Nana Pratt	Women Leader and Activist	NOW
Thomas W. Abu	Disaster Manager Coordinator	Red Cross, Sierra Leone
Nelson A.K.S Nandemoh	Director of Programmes	Red Cross, Sierra Leone
Peter Bailey	Senior Program Manager	Restless Development
Abdul Karim Koroma	Project Coordinator	Restless Development
Sallieu Timbo	Leadership Program Manager	Restless Development
Dr. Joseph Macarthy	Executive Director	SLURC
Sulaiman F. Kamara	Research and Community Officer	SLURC
Abu Conteh	Urban Health Research Officer	SLURC
Abdul Sannoh	National Coordinator	The GEF Small Grants Programme, UNDP
Seinya Bakarr	Livelihoods Specialist	West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change, USAID
Dr. Isata Mahoi	National Network Coordinator	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
Iysha Kamara	Project Manager	Women's Network for Environmental Sustainability
Gertrude Karimu	National Coordinator	Women's Network for Environmental Sustainability
Joseph Kaindaneh	Environmental Specialist	World Bank



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