



POLICY BRIEF

Women leading climate change adaptation

THE GAMBIAN EXPERIENCE

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Summary

- **Women leaders play critical roles in climate change adaptation efforts in The Gambia**, with their initiatives delivering multiple benefits, including for food security, nutrition, livelihoods and social cohesion within communities.
- Yet, **women leaders face persistent barriers** that hinder their full potential. These include cultural norms, gender roles, limited access to resources, capacity gaps, and political marginalization.
- Policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders such as development agencies, research institutions, civil society organizations, traditional leaders, and private sector **actors should collaborate to address these deep-seated barriers that constrain women's leadership.**
- Such **coordinated efforts are essential** to ensure that women can meaningfully participate in and also continue to lead climate change adaptation at all levels.

Introduction

In The Gambia, **the impacts of climate change in agriculture and related sectors are increasingly damaging lives, livelihoods, and ecosystems, and hindering poverty eradication efforts.** More erratic rainfalls, intense and frequent droughts and flooding, and rising temperatures have resulted in drastic drops in crop yields in recent years, with severe consequences for food and nutrition security, especially for the most vulnerable populations¹. These climatic changes are projected to be a major constraint to agricultural production in future, with far-reaching consequences for certain Gambian communities.

Given the centrality of agriculture to the Gambia's economy, with approximately 72% of poor households and 91% of extremely poor rural households relying on it as their main sources of income, climate change adaptation in agriculture was made a priority in the country's 2050 Climate Vision². This prioritization underscores the **urgent need for inclusive, locally-led strategies that can strengthen resilience** and safeguard livelihoods.

Women leaders already play pivotal roles in climate change adaptation in The Gambia, with recent research identifying how women lead efforts that not only contribute to climate resilience but also contribute to food security, economic stability and environmental sustainability. **Strengthening women's leadership is therefore a critical pathway to ensure effective adaptation in the face of climate change.**

1. MECCNAR. (2021). The Gambia 2050 Climate Vision. Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Natural Resources (MECCNAR), Government of The Gambia, Banjul. Accessed at: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/gam208266.pdf>

2. Ibid.



Women leaders in action

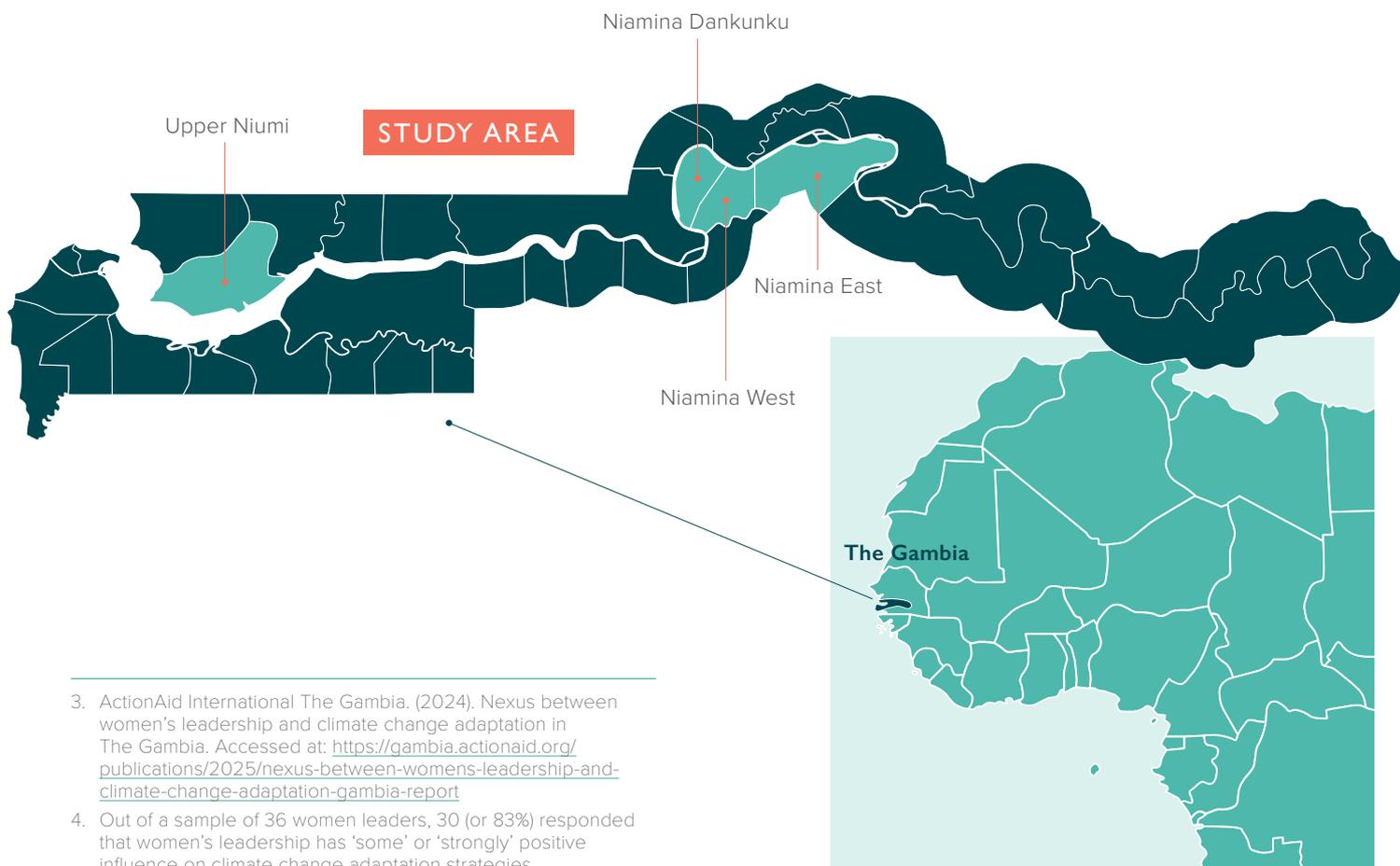
A recent [research study](#) conducted in 2024 in four districts of The Gambia (Niamina East, Niamina West, Niamina Dankunku, and Upper Niumi) explored how women are building resilience to climate shocks, particularly in the agriculture and forestry sectors³. These initiatives (indicated in Table 1, page 4) showcase the types of adaptation activities that women engage with and lead, and the multiple benefits for individuals, households, and communities that were reported by men and women who participated in the study.

The majority of participants in the study said women’s leadership positively influences climate change adaptation⁴. A male member of a village development committee even observed that in his community, most of the successful projects are run by women. Women clearly play an integral role in leading climate change adaptation strategies at the community-level – which has ripple effects that enhance food security, nutrition, livelihoods and social cohesion.

Women’s leadership can also encourage other women to participate and lead. According to a woman leader in the Central River Region:

“Inclusion of a woman in the district tribunal is working well because many women are now freely sharing their stories and actively involved in decision-making.”

Yet, women leaders face persistent barriers that challenge their work and hinder their full potential. **The study also identified a range of challenges that prevent women from taking up, continuing in or thriving in leadership roles**, including limited access to resources and technical training, restrictive cultural norms and gender roles, male-dominated leadership structures and political marginalization, among others.



3. ActionAid International The Gambia. (2024). Nexus between women’s leadership and climate change adaptation in The Gambia. Accessed at: <https://gambia.actionaid.org/publications/2025/nexus-between-womens-leadership-and-climate-change-adaptation-gambia-report>

4. Out of a sample of 36 women leaders, 30 (or 83%) responded that women’s leadership has ‘some’ or ‘strongly’ positive influence on climate change adaptation strategies.

Table 1: Key adaptation initiatives led by women

Initiative	Benefits reported
 <p>Promotion of climate-resilient crop varieties</p> <p>Women are cultivating drought-tolerant crops and early-maturing rice varieties (NERICA) to adapt to erratic rainfall patterns and shortened wet seasons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Increased and more reliable agricultural productivity ✓ Improved nutrition in communities ✓ Increased income generation
 <p>Soil and nutrient management practices</p> <p>Women promote monthly clean-ups and initiate composting of animal and plant waste into organic fertilizer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Improved soil fertility ✓ Increased crop yields ✓ Reduced reliance on costly chemical inputs ✓ Increased income generation
 <p>Small ruminant exchange</p> <p>Women leaders initiated programs where livestock are raised and exchanged among members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Improved household income ✓ Strengthened social cohesion ✓ Enhanced community resilience
 <p>Tree planting and reforestation</p> <p>Women mobilized communities to plant fruit and indigenous trees, creating embankments and windbreaks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rehabilitated degraded lands ✓ Prevented soil erosion ✓ Increased protection from windstorms and flooding ✓ Increased shade for livestock ✓ Increased food availability
 <p>Adoption of energy-efficient stoves</p> <p>Women are promoting energy-efficient stoves to replace firewood used for cooking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reduced use of wood for fuel ✓ Reduced emissions and improved air quality ✓ Reduced time and labour burden from collecting fire wood
 <p>Flood and erosion control</p> <p>Women constructed sandbag barriers to manage saltwater intrusion into crops.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Protection of crops ✓ Increased and more reliable agricultural productivity



Addressing barriers to women's leadership

Policymakers, practitioners, and donors need to work together to address the barriers constraining women's leadership in climate change adaptation. Table 2 identifies possible actions these actors can take to redress some of the key challenges highlighted in the research study.

Table 2: Addressing barriers to women's leadership

Barrier	Evidence	Suggested actions
✗ Cultural norms and gender roles	Deeply-entrenched societal expectations often marginalize women in decision-making spaces, limiting their ability to influence formal policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote and enforce gender-sensitive policies to ensure that women's leadership is recognized and prioritized in national and local climate adaptation strategies.
✗ Limited access to resources	Women typically have limited access to funding, tools, and land ownership, which are essential for scaling climate adaptation initiatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilitate access to funding and materials, such as drought-tolerant seeds and energy-efficient tools that can enhance the scope of women-led initiatives. ■ Advocate for increased land access and secure ownership for women.
✗ Capacity gaps	Inadequate educational opportunities and technical training hinder women's ability to engage in strategic planning and policy advocacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide technical training on climate-smart agricultural practices and leadership skills for women to work effectively and innovate. ■ Provide training and mentoring to women leaders to help improve leadership skills.
✗ Political marginalization	Male-dominated leadership structures often resist women's participation, creating additional hurdles for women striving to lead.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Create platforms for women leaders to connect with stakeholders in fostering knowledge exchange and collaborative problem-solving opportunities. ■ Encourage male support and allyship to counter resistance, including involving traditional leaders.

IN THE WORDS OF WOMEN LEADERS:

"Providing women with community resources allows us to raise funds and implement other activities on our own."

(WOMAN LEADER, AGE 36)

"Recognition and support of local women leaders will encourage others to emulate them, seeing their achievements being acknowledged."

(WOMAN LEADER, AGE 39)

"Policies geared toward making women lead in climate change adaptation are crucial because some male leaders will only change with enforced policies"

(WOMAN LEADER, AGE 28)

Call to action: harnessing the potential of women's leadership

True resilience requires shared leadership and collective action by both women and men. In particular, women's voices, experiences, participation, and leadership are integral to informing and delivering effective adaptation strategies. The Gambia's 2050 Climate Vision clearly supports this view by encouraging investments in local institutions to build climate capabilities, including "fostering home-grown skills and expertise in the next generation of leaders, especially among women and youth"⁵.

But to fully harness the potential of women's leadership in adaptation, **policymakers must strive to address the deep-seated barriers to women's leadership** and prioritize gender-responsive frameworks and policies.

Collaboration will be key. Partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities are vital for sustaining efforts and scaling successful initiatives. Moreover, **integrating women's voices into every stage of climate change adaptation**, from planning to implementation, not only supports equality but also enhances the effectiveness of these strategies.

As The Gambia faces the realities of climate change, **the time to act is now.** By unlocking the potential of women's leadership, the country can turn its climate challenges into opportunities for growth and resilience and support sustainable development for future generations.

Strengthening women's leadership is a critical step towards adapting to climate change and building resilient communities.

Recommended starting points include:

- 1 Enhance equitable resource access:** Provide funding mechanisms tailored to women-led initiatives by providing the tools and materials needed for effective implementation.
- 2 Expand proven practices:** Scale up successful community-based adaptation measures, such as tree planting and composting, to other regions facing similar vulnerabilities.
- 3 Strengthen gender-inclusive policies:** Support and implement frameworks such as The Gambia's National Gender Policy (2025-2034) and Gender and Climate Change Action Plan (2025-2029) to ensure women's leadership is a core element of climate change adaptation strategies.
- 4 Engage men as allies:** Sensitize male leaders to collaborate with women in building climate resilience by fostering mutual respect and shared responsibility.

5. MECCNAR. (2021), p.19.

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