

Empowering Women in the Face of Climate Change in Africa:

An Opportunity for Gender Inclusion

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Women face amplified risks from climate change on a range of outcomes related to their health, education, livelihoods, and safety. In Africa, women are often more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to their roles in society as primary caregivers, water and food providers, and farmers. Studies have identified that 1° C increase in long-term average temperature is associated with a 34% reduction in the total incomes of female-headed households, relative to those of male-headed households.

Taking into consideration that in countries such as South Africa close to 50% of households are headed by women, climate change is an imminent threat to the economic sustainability of African families. Furthermore, in the wake of disaster or drought, girls may be removed from school, and studies have shown that climate-induced stress can increase gender-based violence in households. Empowering women in the face of climate change in Africa is not only a matter of social justice and gender equality but also a practical necessity for building resilience, promoting sustainable development, and tackling the challenges posed by a changing climate.

Integrating women is vital to succeed in the fight against climate change

In the global dialogue on climate change, women have emerged as critical stakeholders for understanding climate-related impacts and for identifying the most effective climate solutions. Women often have unique insights into local environmental issues and traditional coping mechanisms that can help communities adapt to changing conditions, improve natural resource management, and energy production. Unfortunately, women are often sidelined from the burgeoning green economy and climate discussions. For example, only 2% of venture funding in climate is given to women lead projects and women are still significantly underrepresented in the labor force of climate sectors such as renewable energy. Even though evidence suggests that when women are involved in leadership and decision-making, business outcomes are more sustainable and equitable, only 10% of the COP28 leaders were women.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that companies with a significant female presence in senior management tend to have lower carbon footprints¹. By empowering women to participate in climate action and green initiatives, African countries can promote more inclusive and sustainable development pathways that benefit both people and the planet. As Carey Bohjanen, Founder, The Rallying Cry Africa mentions: “We need to have more women’s voices in the room, more women getting seats at the table, at both the private and public sector level. Increased representation leads to increased transformation.”²

Fighting climate change by greening the African built environment together with women

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959652622022375>

² <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/2024/gender-responsive-climate-governance-report.pdf>

The building sector is a major contributor to global CO2 emissions, accounting for about 40% of energy and industry-related emissions. The built environment in Africa will continue to expand responding to demographic shifts. The UN projects that by 2050, Africa's population will reach close to 2.5 billion. Such a figure would mean that more than 25 percent of the world's population will be African, thereby increasing the demand for buildings. The World Green Building Council estimates that 80% percent of the buildings needed in Africa by 2050 are yet to be built³. As green buildings emerge as a solution to decarbonize economies and advance economic transition, the greening of the African built environment is a great opportunity to promote diversity and inclusion.

Women bring different perspectives, experiences, and skills to the table, which may lead to more innovative and holistic approaches to sustainable design and construction. By encouraging more women to pursue careers in green buildings, the sector can benefit from a diversification of skills and expertise. Women often bring unique strengths in areas such as collaboration, communication, and problem-solving, which are valuable for addressing complex sustainability challenges. Moreover, women are often deeply connected to their communities and have a strong understanding of local needs and priorities. Having more women involved in green building projects can help ensure that designs are culturally sensitive, socially inclusive, and responsive to the specific requirements of different communities in Africa. By encouraging more women to enter this field, African countries can promote gender equality, empower women economically, and contribute to the development of a more sustainable and resilient built environment.

IFC's efforts to promote the inclusion of women in green buildings and climate businesses

The Green Building Program executed by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) actively encourages women's engagement in the green building sector. This program leverages EDGE ("Excellence in Design for Greater Efficiencies") certification as a solution to demonstrate the business case for building green and to facilitate financial investment in sustainable construction. Recognizing that increasing the visibility of women in leadership roles within the green building sector can serve as inspiration for the next generation of female professionals, IFC and Green Building Council South Africa (GBCSA) identified three outstanding women as winners of the Women in Green Building Competition at the Green Building Convention 2023 held in Cape Town, South Africa. These winners, who are among the 51% of female IFC EDGE Experts in South Africa, were honored for their contributions to sustainable construction and their roles as EDGE Experts. The competition provided in-person and online training to ten finalists, with the three winners scoring the highest. The award ceremony was part of a workshop titled "Celebrating Women in Green Building: Rising Stars," which aimed to inspire and empower more women to take on leadership roles in the industry.

IFC champions initiatives that integrate women into climate action, from promoting their leadership in corporate settings to supporting women-led climate startups. For example, IFC's Energy2Equal⁴ Africa Program aims at empowering women in Africa's renewable energy sector. Through partnerships with private sector renewable energy companies, this initiative seeks to expand women's access to jobs and leadership roles in the sector. Also, IFC launched the Women in Renewable Energy in Africa Network (W-

³ WGBC <https://worldgbc.org/worldgbc-africa-manifesto/>

⁴ <https://www.ifc.org/en/where-we-work/africa/improving-infrastructure-in-africa/energy2equal-africa>

REA)⁵ to enhance women's participation in leadership and employment in the renewable energy sector through networking, mentoring, advocacy, and leadership training. This network aims to address the lack of professional networking and mentoring opportunities for women working in sub-Saharan Africa's renewable energy sector. In addition, the She Wins Africa⁶ program focuses on unlocking the potential of women entrepreneurs across sub-Saharan Africa. By offering training, mentorship, and networking opportunities, the program aims to help women-led startups succeed. It provides investment readiness training, business skills capacity building, capacity building for funds and Venture Capital on gender-lens investing, and assistance for accelerators and entrepreneurship support organizations to incubate early-stage startups.

Looking forward

The integration of gender inclusion into green building development is not just a moral imperative but a strategic advantage. Women's participation in sustainable architecture and construction brings diversity of thought, innovation, and resilience to the industry. As we build towards a more sustainable future, it is essential to ensure that green buildings are not only environmentally sound but also socially equitable, with women playing a central role in shaping this new landscape. Increasing the participation of women in green buildings in Africa not only promotes gender equality and diversity but also leads to more sustainable, inclusive, and effective solutions to environmental challenges in the region. By harnessing the talents and perspectives of women, the green building sector can drive positive change and contribute to a more sustainable future for Africa.

⁵ <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/2023/exploring-opportunities-for-women-entrepreneurs-driving-climate-solutions.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.ifc.org/en/where-we-work/africa/promoting-gender-equality-in-africa/she-wins-africa>