

VOICES OF CHANGE: ZAMBIAN WOMEN PIONEERING CLIMATE ACTION

A young girl facing drought, credit: Tucker Tungeman, Unsplash

It is widely known that young girls and women in the Global South take the brunt of climate change more than men. As a result, women are often depicted as helpless victims in mainstream media. But this is far from the truth! In Zambia, women are also powerful agents of change in their communities. In this whitepaper, we look at the remarkable role women in Zambia play in responding to climate change and developing their own climate solutions.

Climate change in Zambia

In Zambia, climate change heavily affects people's everyday lives, including their access to water, food, education, healthcare and jobs.

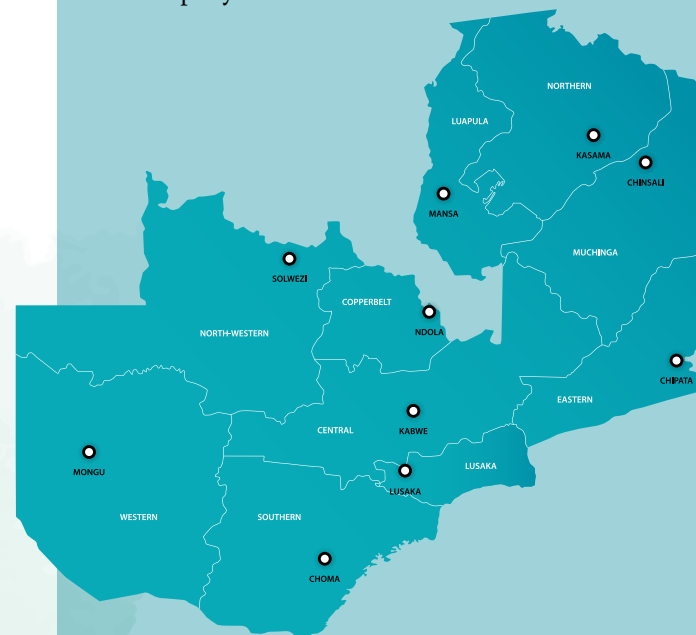
Long periods of droughts make it hard for girls and women to fetch water, forcing them to walk ever-increasing distances. When rain finally comes, it is often delayed by weeks or months, and farmers end up having little to no harvest at all. With no food at home, women have to look for food elsewhere. But the prices of staple products, such as maize, have soared. Buying a 25 kg bag of maize in 2024 costs almost twice as much as in 2023 (now 350 Zambian Kwacha vs. 238 KW), making it nearly impossible for many families to cook more than one meal daily.

Moreover, when rains finally come, they are often heavy and cause flash floods, which isolate certain rural areas for weeks or months. With no way to go to school, girls often drop out and are married off as child brides. With no way to go to a rural health clinic, girls and women have no access to contraception, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and health complications.

When floods combine with hot weather and poor sanitation and hygiene, water becomes contaminated with bacteria, leading to malaria and cholera outbreaks. These circumstances led to the 2023 cholera epidemic in Zambia,^[9] which escalated into a public health emergency. Women who are primary caregivers suffer the most because they risk their lives looking after their families.

Getting to know Zambia

Zambia is a lower-middle-income country in Southern Africa. It is landlocked, located on a plateau with hills and mountains, and has a tropical climate. Its area is slightly larger than Texas.^[1] The current population of Zambia is 20.6 million people, of which 42% are youth (0-14).^[2] With a total fertility rate of 4.3 children per woman^[3] (population growth rate of 2.84%),^[4] the population should double in the next 15 to 25 years.^{[5][6]} This is due to lack of access to family planning services, education for girls, and employment for women. The country is facing economic challenges, energy crisis, widespread poverty, spread of diseases (such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis) and impacts of climate change.^[7] In 2022, the average Zambian produced 0.4 tons of CO₂, compared to the average American, who produced 14.9 tonnes of CO₂ per year.^[8]



While it is true that women in Zambia suffer from the consequences of climate change, let's look at a different picture now. We interviewed three Zambian activists to find out how women in different parts of Zambia are addressing climate change and implementing climate solutions.

- **Ruby Kryticous is a climate change & youth advocate.** She is a Board Member of Green Agricultural Youth Organization (GAYO).^[10] GAYO is a youth-led advocacy group focusing on environmental sustainability and community development.
- **Nachilala Nkombo is a Co-founder of Women Leaders for Climate Action.**^[11] This network seeks to enhance women's resilience to climate change by eliminating gender gaps in accessing climate finance in Zambia. Nkombo is the former Country Director of World Wildlife Fund Zambia.^[12]
- **Olivia Mwaba Zulu is the Monitoring & Evaluation Manager at PMC Zambia and the National Focal Point for the Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction.**^[13]^[14] Prior to joining PMC, she worked in the family planning space in rural areas.

ZAMBIAN WOMEN DRIVE CLIMATE RESILIENCE



By being actively involved in sustainable resource management, reforestation, wildlife conservation and climate action, **Zambian women contribute to the overall climate resilience of the whole country.**

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“Climate change is a major challenge but also a major opportunity to reimagine production and our relationship with nature to promote more sustainable and stronger economies. These shifts in productive practices will promote a healthy and prosperous natural environment that will lead to healthier populations.”

– Nachilala Nkombo



**Co-founders of Women Leaders for
Climate Action in Zambia,** credit: WLCA/ FCDO



Agricultural innovators

In Zambia, women are at the forefront of adopting climate-resilient agricultural practices, including diversification of crops, water-efficient farming techniques, and sustainable land management. New initiatives are mushrooming all across the country.

In the southern parts of Zambia, such as Mazabuka, Choma and Kazungula, women have been reintroducing drought-resilient crops, such as cassava, sorghum, ground nuts, soya beans and millet. By diversifying the crops, they have been decreasing their dependency on maize, increasing their incomes and ensuring more nutritious food for their families. A cassava tuber (see the image below) has various uses: It can be consumed fresh, dried, or milled into flour, and the leaves are eaten as vegetables.

In southwest Zambia, women are involved in growing seeds for drought-resilient cereals and vegetables and selling them to AfriSeed. This company helps small-scale farmers increase their agricultural productivity.^[5] Women are also at the forefront of ensuring water security. In northern parts of Zambia, women have implemented water-efficient farming techniques, such as rainwater harvesting in field drainage.

In Central Zambia (Chongwe district), women and youth build wells. In contrast, in the central and southern provinces, the World Wildlife Fund has worked with community leader Chief Musungwa to restore natural water lagoons, which now provide water storage in drier periods, and ensure women avoid going to the Kafue River, where they often have conflicts with wildlife, to fetch water.

By embracing these innovative approaches, Zambian women have been contributing to increased agricultural productivity and community resilience to climate change.

“When we empower a woman, we don’t empower just her but also her community. When we empower her community, we empower future generations.”

– Ruby Kryticous



A field with cabbage and field drainages, credit: GAYO



Women selling cassava at the local market, credit: GAYO

Community-based conservationists & climate advocates

Whenever women are empowered through education and family planning, they tend to protect natural resources and biodiversity in their communities. Zambia is no different.

Zambian women promote sustainable forest management by protecting existing forests and restoring damaged areas. In Central Zambia (Chongwe and Rufunsa district), women and youth are restoring forested areas by planting trees. These trees support bee hives and enable the restorers to collect rich wild honey to sell in nearby markets. This brings women and youth an additional income from selling honey and helps regenerate forests.



Students at the Chishiko school with Ruby Kryticous planting trees, credit: GAYO

ZAMBIAN WOMEN
**PROMOTING
SUSTAINABLE
CHANGE**



“Everything is centered around women, and that’s why we need them to step up and be part of the decision-making process. We need to see more women involved in planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing strategies.”

– Olivia Mwaba-Zulu



Workshop with students, credit: GAYO

AS OF 2022 THE FIRST ALL-WOMEN ANTI-POACHING UNIT WAS FORMED

The female scouts patrol, looking for poachers who hunt elephants, pangolins, warthogs and porcupines.



Women attending a workshop by Life Initiative For Change about disaster risk management, credit: Olivia Mwaba-Zulu

While wildlife conservation in national parks has traditionally been dominated by men, as of 2022, Zambia now has its first all-women anti-poaching unit in the Lower Zambezi National Park. The female scouts patrol the area looking for poachers who hunt elephants, pangolins, warthogs and porcupines. They also resolve human-wildlife conflicts with local communities.^[16]

Zambian women are also taking on roles as educators and advocates for climate action in several organizations, such as Green Agricultural Youth Organization,^[17] Women Leaders for Climate Action,^[18] Life Initiative for Change^[19] and Zambia Climate Change Network.^[20] They raise awareness about climate change, organize community workshops, and advocate for policies that address climate-related challenges.

By being actively involved in sustainable resource management, reforestation, wildlife conservation and climate action, Zambian women contribute to the overall climate resilience of the whole country.





Briquettes are an alternative to charcoal, credit: GAYO

Clean energy advocates

In Zambia, where the demand for charcoal is rising exponentially and leading to the destruction of highly biodiverse forests, clean cooking represents an essential step in climate change mitigation. In Central Zambia (Chongwe, Rufunsa and Luangwa), women have started replacing charcoal for cooking with cleaner-burning briquettes, made from native dry waste from plants. Using briquettes from abundantly available materials helps families reduce their dependence on charcoal and reduce deforestation.

In recent years, Zambia has been facing a crippling energy crisis, which leads to frequent power shortages and interruptions in service. To have stable electricity, Zambian women have been adopting clean energy solutions, such as solar power.

In central Zambia, some women have learned to build and install solar panels on their houses. Solar energy is not only cheaper and abundant but also more stable. Having light at home in the evening makes a huge difference for families, including schoolchildren with homework.^[21]

These examples highlight the diverse ways in which women in Zambia are not only adapting to climate change but also driving positive change within their communities. Recognizing and supporting these efforts is essential for building more sustainable and resilient societies driven by women in Zambia and elsewhere. It's also essential to help women's voices be more heard and represented, as Olivia Mwaba Zulu, Monitoring & Evaluation Manager at PMC Zambia, says.

A Few more tips on how to improve the resilience of girls and women to climate change in Zambia and elsewhere:

- Support girls' education
- Improve access to modern family planning
- Change harmful social norms (gender-based violence, child marriages)
- Improve women's economic and financial skills
- Advocate for women's representation in community development committees
- Engage women in decision-making processes
- Create platforms for girls to be heard and to share their experiences
- Facilitate know-how transfer among women
- Increase climate adaptation financing in Zambia

What PMC has been doing in Zambia:

From May 2021 to September 2022, PMC ran two captivating radio serial dramas – *Kwishilya* (“Over the Horizon”) and *Siñalamba* (“Breaking the Barrier”) that reached an audience of 3 million people, mostly youth (15-34 years). The shows touched on family planning, maternal and child health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS and COVID-19.

The shows had a positive impact on the lives of listeners. *Kwishilya* listeners were more than 50% likelier than non-listeners to believe they can determine their family size. They were almost 20% more likely than non-listeners to be using a modern contraceptive method to delay or avoid pregnancy. *Siñalamba* listeners were 1.45 times more likely than non-listeners to discuss HIV risk with others, such as their partner, spouse, friend or relatives.^[22]

Since 2023, PMC Zambia has been actively engaged in three innovative projects targeting populations aged 15-24 as the primary group and those aged 25-49 as the secondary audience. These projects encompass radio call-in shows, comic book shows, and mini-drama series, focusing on critical health and social issues such as HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, sexual and gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies, and early and child marriages.

Additionally, PMC Zambia is exploring integrating climate change communication into its initiatives. Presently, PMC is collaborating with the Ministry of Health to facilitate communication programs via call-in shows that address emerging health threats like cholera, which are linked to climate impacts in Zambia.



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