



Promoting Rural Women's Leadership:

Using Gender Transformative Approaches to Transform Communities, Address Gender-Based Violence and Build Climate Resilience

CWS understands that gender inequality and climate disruption intersect to worsen life chances and opportunities for all. In communities characterized by prescriptive, long upheld gender norms and roles, new problems emerge for women and girls when environmental damage and extreme weather events occur. CWS advocates for greater harmonization of policies that address climate change and gender inequality. It also calls for gender inclusive climate solutions with U.S. legislators and in international climate negotiations.

With predefined responsibilities for cooking, cleaning and childcare, women and girls already bear the brunt of the additional workload caused by slow onset disasters such as drought. When sudden onset disasters occur such as extreme rainfall or floods, commonly held assets can be further eroded, forcing many families to resort to harmful traditional practices in their search for emergency income. In communities where the practices are questioned, overwhelmed and resource poor families can resort to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early marriage, and bride price negotiation for pre-pubescent girls, even if these are prohibited by national law.

CWS's work shows that transformative change is possible when programs explicitly address gender roles, and when communities are helped to take charge of their own development through integrated, participatory processes. The promotion of women's involvement in management of community resources can then translate into environmental benefits for families and the community.

Gender Transformative Approaches: A Key Tool for Meaningful Change

CWS's program in West Pokot promotes an Asset Based Community Development Framework (ABCD). The approach recognizes the existence of local assets and social capital and prioritizes self-mobilization to promote a community driven development model that builds capacity without creating dependence. Implemented in farming and animal-keeping communities characterized as much by unpredictable seasonal variability as by harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and FGM, its goal is to make communities more resilient to food, water and livelihood insecurity, and extreme weather related emergencies, now being exacerbated by climate change.

Using access to water as a catalyst for tackling other community concerns, the Water for Life Program addresses deeper structural challenges including: health, food production, nutrition, animal husbandry, economic livelihoods, the unequal sexual division of labor, community conflict, environmental degradation, and the management and control of community resources. As the community gains confidence and builds trust with CWS program staff, opportunities emerge which allow open discussion about girls' enrolment at school. Through respectful dialogue involving both men and women, the consequences of harmful traditional practices can be questioned, including sensitive issues such as domestic violence, wife beating, control of family income, and girls' right to education.

A CWS led study conducted in 2018 provided measurable evidence that, since CWS's intervention, positive change had occurred in the community's understanding of gender norms. Communities – including male relatives - were less accepting of FGM and child marriage, but more open to women's involvement in income generation and natural resource management. It showed that communities can indeed redress imbalances of power between men and women through culturally appropriate, gender sensitive facilitation.

These outcomes are consistent with on the emerging literature on best practices for working with men and boys on GBV, which emphasize the importance of empowering women and explicitly supporting gender equality, and of engaging both men and women in whole of community approaches. CWS believes this approach is both replicable and scaleable: after the 2019 flooding disaster in the Tana River community, CWS was asked by the County Government to share its rapid assessment and profiling tools, further demonstrating their potential to be scaled up to other regions.

Positive outcomes for women and girls don't happen by themselves. They are the product of explicit, intentional and targeted interventions, in which priority is given to addressing gender inequality.



Photo: Shanley Studio

Climate change threatens hard-won community development gains, and protecting girls is critical following extreme weather events.

Changing long held beliefs, behaviors and the underlying gender norms governing them is possible. However, it can only result from a sustained effort delivered by long term project interventions, backed by multiple year funding. Nonetheless, even in the most successful cases, positive project outcomes can be fragile if unexpected problems occur. Climate change now threatens to derail, and in some cases reverse, progress already made. As droughts and floods increasing occur, they exact an emotional and physical toll, as well destroying livestock, crops, homes and infrastructure.

In April 2018, River Tana, the biggest river in Kenya burst its banks following heavy rains. This severely affected communities in which CWS has for many years worked, including those involved in the Water for Life program. We spoke to the women after the Tana River flooding. Many were desperate. Most families have only one or two sources of income and cannot diversify quickly. After disasters, women may have to walk up to 10 miles in search of water. They will take girls out of school to do this task.

“When disasters strike, families lose their crops,” says Mary Conceptor Obiero, the Director of the CWS Relief, Development and Protection Unit in Kenya. “Men will leave with their animals in search of work, leaving women alone to care for children and homes. With families needing money for food, girls can be at risk being taken out of school, married off, or sold. This increases other risks such as FGM, or even trafficking. Because of ethical issues, we cannot directly ask girls as young as 8 about the risk of their being married off.¹ But we know that it is happening.”

“FGM is done between the age of 8 and 15. We need to start looking at the girl child now. We cannot wait until she reaches 18. When you save a girl, you save an entire society.”

-Mary Conceptor Obiero

Studies and policies can easily miss the impact of climate disasters on young girls, but anecdotal evidence of this already exists. This intersection is critical: It is now as important for climate policy to consider gender implications as it is for gender equality interventions to analyze exactly how the climate crisis will exacerbate problems for specific groups.



¹ Child protection protocols prevent researchers from asking minors questions about marriage.

CWS Presence in U.S.-Based and International Advocacy on Climate Change and Gender Equality

CWS has long advocated for an ambitious U.S. legislative and policy response to climate change and gender equality. It has endorsed the Green Climate Fund Authorization Act, the 100% Clean Economy Act, and the Climate Change Resilience bill which calls for comprehensive, scaled up U.S. action on climate, including durable solutions for climate displaced persons. It is a member of the U.S. based Coalition to end Violence Against Women and Girls which advocates for Congressional passage of the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) and Safe from the Start, bills which call for comprehensive federal and legislative action and the allocation of resources to address gender based violence. CWS is also an active member of the ACT Alliance's Global Climate Change Campaign which advocates for - within the UNFCCC system - integration of human right and gender equity based approaches in national and international climate negotiations.

Lessons Learned & Policy Recommendations

Despite the priority now being given to gender equality and women's rights in UN climate change policy instruments, including the UNFCCC, GCF, and the Gender Action Plan agreed at COP25, women's participation and involvement in national level climate policy and program design continues to be poor. Similarly, while rights-based language is enshrined in international conventions and national laws governing the rights of women and girls, these have not led to significant change in their daily lives, nor to significantly reduced incidence of GBV.

CWS's experience shows that, even in the context of increased environmental challenges, with the right facilitation, communities can shift their attitudes in favor of greater gender equality. This can also equip women as empowered agents of change, with environmental benefits for the whole community. Mitigation, adaptation and resilience building solutions must explicitly prioritize gender equality in order to maximize women's leadership potential and prevent the violation of rights in the context of growing resource scarcity and environmental degradation. In order to make this happen, country governments should ensure that support is prioritized for long term, gender equitable and community driven solutions to the climate crisis.

Climate policies must:

- **prioritize women's leadership** as a central plank of the community's resilience building and preparedness.
- **ensure the protection of the rights of women and girls** through explicit measures applied throughout all stages of development and humanitarian assistance.
- **promote the use of gender analysis tools** and gender transformative approaches across program design.
- **provide rapidly scaled up and long-term financing** to enable more communities to engage with long term, transformative community-based empowerment approaches that deliberately address harmful gender codes.
- **be designed across all sectors, using a "whole of government approach"** which is fed into National Action Plans and backed by county, departmental and national governments.

