

Key points

Although Zimbabwe has some progressive national climate change and gender policies, women and girls in informal settlements are disproportionately vulnerable to climate risks.

Policymakers can use gender data to address disparities and connect policy intent with the lived reality of women and girls in informal settlements.

Investing in women-led and locally led climate adaptation initiatives can accelerate more inclusive, equitable and just climate action.

Recognising that domestic and economic roles, social dynamics and adaptive strategies can create gender-specific vulnerabilities helps policymakers develop effective, scalable and gender-responsive urban transformations that promote gender justice and equity.

Closing the gender data gap to enhance climate adaptation in urban Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, more than 40% of households are headed by women. And, despite some policy advances, women and girls face disproportionate climate risks, especially in informal urban settlements. Although some local initiatives by women-led grassroots organisations are improving resilience, persistent social norms, socioeconomic inequalities, underrepresentation and insufficient data continue to hinder progress. Disaggregated data collection reveals the impact of disasters on women and the importance of their leadership in adaptation efforts. Scaling up efforts to develop gender-responsive strategies and integrate women's voices into policy and planning will help to close the gender data gap, and lead to more equitable and sustainable urban climate adaptation.

Although the narrative on the gender-climate nexus is increasingly part of policy and investment conversations around the world, women's leadership is not systematically included.¹ In Zimbabwe, the national policy landscape integrates climate change and gender as crosscutting issues, and has created specific provisions to advance these causes;² but, it pays little attention to how the two intersect, particularly in the context of increasing urban informality. And — while its Climate Change Gender Action Plan acknowledges the need to fully embrace gender equality and women's empowerment to address the challenges of climate change through gender-responsive policies, strategies and programmes that consider the constraints of diverse gender groups — operationalisation remains limited.

Accessible and intersectional data play a crucial role in understanding the challenges

these diverse groups face. They are also vital for identifying what does or does not work in different contexts and at different levels of vulnerability. But lack of both disaggregated data and intersectional analysis mean that data on climate change often fail to capture gender-differentiated experiences, impacts and adaptive responses, particularly for women living in hard-to-reach areas, such as informal settlements.

Gender and climate change in informal settlements

Although they are on the frontline of climate change-induced impacts, informal settlements do not always benefit from infrastructure development; nor are they fully prioritised in climate change resilience building and disaster response. Largely driven by exclusionary planning practises and planning statutes, this

marginalisation reinforces inequality, and deepens structural barriers, biases and long-standing differences between formal and informal systems.³

Addressing gender dynamics and tenure security for informal settlements holds the key to unlocking more capacity for resilience against climate shocks

In informal settlements, a lack of both basic infrastructure and decent shelter, as well as insecure tenure (characterised by a lack of investment and high likelihood of eviction), all reduce resilience, but the impacts of climate change are also shaped by broader socioeconomic and gender inequalities.⁴ These inequalities limit

climate change resilience capacity in informal settlements and exposes the women and girls who live there to multiple hazards. They often experience climate change impacts disproportionately,⁵ due to material conditions, biased gender social norms,⁶ limited access to resources and underrepresentation in decision making, all of which shape their adaptive capacity and affect their health, wellbeing and livelihood options.

The Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation (ZIHOPFE) and Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless Trust (DoS) — a social movement of the urban, rural poor and a nongovernmental organisation, respectively, that form an alliance that is an Slum Dwellers International (SDI) affiliate in Zimbabwe — support locally led adaptation to enhance resilience building in Zimbabwe's cities. They do this by generating their own data⁷ and using gender-disaggregated mapping and profiling collated in community databases to upgrade slums. DoS research in five Zimbabwean cities (Harare, Bulawayo, Masvingo, Kadoma and Epworth) revealed that women are disproportionately impacted by disasters, including climate shocks. Rising temperatures, persistent droughts and deadly flash floods are exposing women to higher levels of gender-based violence (GBV), increased care burdens and precarious livelihoods. At the same time, local authorities exhibit reluctance to work in informal settlements, often criminalising them and providing minimal disaster response. Experiences during COVID-19 also highlighted that, despite their vulnerability, informal settlements are largely absent from relief and social protection schemes in disaster situations.⁸

Climate change magnifies vulnerabilities, exacerbating pre-existing gender issues in

Zimbabwe's informal settlements. In gender focus group discussions, women have expressed how climate-induced flooding has destroyed the roofs of their homes — a significant concern in a country where more than 40% of households are headed by women⁹ as it adds additional economic strain — and destroyed their vegetable crops in areas where inner city horticulture is an important informal livelihood source for women.¹⁰ DoS research shows that incessant droughts since 2021 have led to a rise in GBV at communal water points in informal settlements, including Hopley Farm¹¹ and Epworth. As a result, DoS has supported awareness campaigns¹² for strategies to prevent women in informal settlements from being exposed to violence and insecurity, as well as water point installation and safeguarding training for water point committees.

Gender-responsive climate adaptation in Zimbabwe

Upgrading informal settlements is a form of climate action.¹³ But local adaptation initiatives must recognise that women are not intrinsically vulnerable victims of climate change, and have the capacity and knowledge to become active agents of adaptation and mitigation.¹⁴

Women-led grassroots movements, particularly from the SDI network,⁷ are adopting participatory mapping and enumeration (community-collected household data) to capture gender-specific vulnerabilities to climate change,¹⁵ and using these to guide and inform their responses. For example, in Masvingo, women-led collectives are working together to improve water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) initiatives, reducing women-related health issues, GBV and time spent accessing WASH services. Disaggregated data are demonstrating the success of women's savings groups and WASH initiatives, and the impacts of GBV on women's health.

Increasingly recognised for its community resilience-building potential, data collection is spearheading adaptation action that includes the co-production (collaborations between communities and local institutions) of gender-responsive solutions and governance spaces. For example, DoS and ZIHOPFE are co-producing¹⁶ climate change risk vulnerability assessments in informal settlements in Harare⁴ and other cities to co-create gender-responsive early warning systems and interventions. Women-led collectives are tackling climate change risks and vulnerabilities through community-led adaptation measures that prioritise gender needs and amplify diverse

gender voices — including older, disabled or ethnic minority women — to be heard in local, national and global climate change discussion platforms.

Leveraging local resources from over 500 women-led savings groups has also created local-level climate financing, building on revolving funds like the Gungano Urban Poor Fund¹⁷, to provide opportunities for adaptation, and disaster risk reduction and management strategies. Blending them with international funds, DoS and ZIHOPFE have leveraged such savings to establish city funds in Harare, Bulawayo and Masvingo, in partnership with local authorities and incorporating additional financial resources to support local initiatives that provide loans for communities involved in locally led adaptation initiatives.

Upscaling climate adaptation: community reflections on key challenges

Despite significant investments aimed at improving women's capacity to effectively participate in and lead climate change resilience and adaptation efforts in informal settlements, challenges remain, including knowledge gaps on the impacts of poverty, insufficient education and limited decision-making power.¹⁸ Communities remain concerned about the lack of gender-disaggregated data and transformative approaches that could reduce the impact of factors perpetuating gender inequalities within climate adaptation efforts. This highlights the misalignment, where progress in climate policy and finance does not reach certain geographies, or address realities of informal settlements.

Reflections across the urban poor posit that addressing gender dynamics and tenure security for informal settlements holds the key to unlocking more capacity for resilience against climate shocks, particularly for women and girls. But patriarchal practices often still negatively impact the lives of women and girls, and cannot be changed through policy alone. There must also be a change in gender social norms, so communities and authorities alike recognise the role that empowered women-led collectives can play in providing real transformation using co-generated data and evidence. For scaling, institutionalising local participation and co-designing an appropriate framework or strategy for effective inclusion of community knowledge into climate adaptation efforts, which integrates gender issues, can help address the structural barriers that inhibit the full participation of local and women's voices.

Improving data and gender analysis

These issues raise further questions on current climate data collection methods and the need to increase our understanding of gender-responsive impacts and strategies for improving climate resilience through better gender analysis.

The climate vulnerability assessments for climate-related issues being undertaken by DoS and ZIHOPFE are a deliberate process to understand how climate change impacts different groups within a community, such as women, children, the elderly and people living with disabilities. The process considers disaggregated data, and access to resources and decision-making spaces, along with health and care burdens. In Kariba, work on heat risks and measurement is using community-led data collection to integrate questions on gender-diverse impacts for consideration when designing solutions.

We need to understand what it will take to operationalise and actualise gender-responsive strategies into policies to engage women leaders, secure funding and use data to scale and sustain gender-responsive initiatives beyond project level to reach city level.

Much work has been done at the grassroots level to increase spaces for women to raise their voices, yet the extents to which residents



ZIHOPFE member and food vendor, Matshuma, preparing food for sale, Zimbabwe. Credit: KYCTV/Dialogue on Shelter, Zimbabwe

have agency and women have successfully occupied decision-making spaces remain unclear. More work is still needed to understand the root causes of gender inequalities to determine whether this is related to a lack of gender data or to other issues, such as engrained patriarchal structures or the lack of political capabilities to engage meaningfully in decision-making spaces.

Inclusive urban transformation opportunities

Gender-responsive, community-led data collection will be key to understanding how successful locally led adaptation approaches are, and to make visible the often-overlooked gendered dimensions of climate impacts. When women, particularly those in informal settlements, lead data-gathering efforts, they help ensure adaptation priorities reflect their lived experiences and needs. This strengthens policy relevance and local accountability, while also serving as a tool for empowerment and inclusion in climate, environmental and urban policy and decision making.

This calls for more interrogation of variables and indicators of success to capture disaggregated data that clearly demonstrate levels of access, engagement, influence of social norms, and impacts of climate change on women, children and other community groups. This work should identify knowledge gaps; how successfully these are being addressed to amplify women's voices and enhance climate resilience, integrate women into decision-making spaces and create more gender-responsive policies; and what spaces have been created to build capacity around access to improved services, livelihoods, and support for adaptation and climate resilience.¹⁸ Understanding what is needed to scale up and replicate gender-responsive climate action will ultimately contribute to a more equitable and inclusive approach to urban adaptation efforts.

Marcelle Mardon, Evans Banana, Teurai Anna Nyamangara and Karen Wong Pérez

Marcelle Mardon, researcher, IIED; Evans Banana, programmes manager, DoS; Teurai Anna Nyamangara, programmes officer, DoS; Karen Wong Pérez, senior researcher, IIED.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

DoS is a registered trust and acts as a technical partner supporting ZIHOPFE to address poverty in informal settlements through women- and youth-led approaches and strategies. ZIHOPFE is an autonomous network of community-based organisations whose members are residents of slums, informal settlements and backyard shacks in Zimbabwe's towns, cities, periurban and rural areas.

Contact

Marcelle Mardon
marcelle.mardon@iied.org

44 Southampton Buildings
London, WC2A 1AP
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback
via: www.linkedin.com/company/iied

ISBN: 978-1-83759-173-2

This work is done with the generous support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of this donor.

FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about our work on the gender-climate-environment nexus at www.iied.org/collection/gender-environment-hub.

Notes

¹ Deinger, F, Woodhouse, A, Kuriakose, AT, Gren, A and Liaqat, S (2023) Placing gender equality at the center of climate action. World Bank Group. / ² Government of Zimbabwe (2024) Zimbabwe's national climate change adaptation plan; Government of Zimbabwe (2022) Zimbabwe climate change gender action plan; Government of Zimbabwe (2021) National climate change learning strategy. / ³ Lewanika, M-D, Mswelanto, T, Karakadzai, T and Lines, K (2024) Experimenting with multistakeholder reform coalition: the case of the Urban Informality Forum in Zimbabwe. African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) — Urban Reform Database. / ⁴ ACRC (2023) How is climate change impacting Harare's informal settlements? 8 August. / ⁵ Jabeen, H (2019) Gendered space and climate resilience in informal settlements in Khulna City, Bangladesh, *Environment & Urbanization*, 31(1), pp.115–138. doi:10.1177/0956247819828274. / ⁶ UNDP's 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) for Zimbabwe is 98.61. The GSNI quantifies biases against women, capturing people's attitudes on women's roles along four key dimensions: political, educational, economic and physical integrity. See: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI> / ⁷ Cities Alliance (2017) How data empowers women to drive change in informal urban settlements, 7 September. / ⁸ IIED, Social protection and urban informality: how Zimbabwe tackled COVID-19, www.iied.org/social-protection-urban-informality-how-zimbabwe-tackled-covid-19. Accessed 24 October 2025. / ⁹ CEIC, Zimbabwe ZW: female-headed households, www.ceicdata.com/en/zimbabwe/population-and-urbanization-statistics/zw-female-headed-households. Accessed 15 August 2025. / ¹⁰ ILO (2021) Outside the box: The resilience that keeps the economy moving, 8 November. / ¹¹ ICCAD (2023) Study visit to Hopley Farm in Zimbabwe, 30 March. / ¹² Plan International (2022) Violence in the city: insights from young people across six cities. / ¹³ Cities Alliance, Slums and slum upgrading, www.citiesalliance.org/themes/slums-and-slum-upgrading. Accessed 15 August 2025. / ¹⁴ IFAD (2020) Scaling-out gender transformation for climate change, 12 March. / ¹⁵ Patel, S (2021) What women want – part two: to map vulnerability to climate change, IIED, 11 June. / ¹⁶ Cities Alliance, Building Resilience in Informal Settlements: Phase I Results (2020–2021), www.citiesalliance.org/how-we-work/core-themes/building-resilience-informal-settlements/results. Accessed 24 October 2025. / ¹⁷ IIED, Delivering climate finance at the local level: the Gungano Urban Poor Fund, www.iied.org/delivering-climate-finance-local-level-gungano-urban-poor-fund. Accessed 24 October 2025. / ¹⁸ Mironga, A (2025) Urban informal settlements: the critical role of women in the resilience to climate change and adaptation in Hopley, Zimbabwe, *Proceedings of the International Conference on Future of Women*, 4(01). doi:10.17501/26028646.2025.4101.

