

WOMEN CLIMATE DEFENDERS

VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION - DOSSIER - JULY 2024

Yuliana (27), climate activist - from Indonesia

My goal is to eliminate hunger caused by harvest failures and to prevent dried up rivers. We need more people dedicated to protecting our planet”

Proud alliance partners:



INTRODUCTION

Did you know that climate change disproportionately affects women, especially those in the Global South? Globally, women often manage crucial tasks such as collecting water, farming, gathering firewood, and maintaining households. These activities are severely impacted by climate change-induced events like floods and droughts, requiring women to work harder to safeguard their families' livelihoods. [1]

Despite their significant contributions and challenges, women frequently lack representation in decision-making processes. On average, women hold only a quarter of the seats in national parliaments worldwide.[2] For example, when Azerbaijan announced its 28-member organising committee for the 2024 COP29 climate conference, not a single woman was initially included.

It's time to change this narrative. Voices for Just Climate Action, a network of six international organisations, collaborates with local activists to advocate for a more climate-just society. Our collective effort allows us to leverage overlapping areas of expertise, leading to more comprehensive and impactful solutions.

This portfolio showcases several outstanding women from this network, for example: Conceição in the Brazilian Amazon, who files legal actions against major polluters; Halima in Tunisia, who leads an organisation aiding women farmers affected by drought; and Natasha in Zambia, who facilitates discussions between women and policymakers to address community challenges and needs in the face of climate change.

The challenges these women address within their communities vary, yet all are driven by the belief that sustainable climate action cannot succeed if half the population is consistently left out of decision-making. True climate justice ensures that every voice is heard, particularly those of the most vulnerable groups affected by the climate crisis.

[1] United Nations Chronicle: From Nos. 3 & 4, Vol. XLVI, SPECIAL CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUE: "To Protect Succeeding Generations...", 2009

[2] The World Bank: proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, 2022
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>

1. CONCEIÇÃO AMORIM: BRAZIL



Climate change devastates nature and causes injustice and human suffering in far too many parts of the world. Activist Conceição Amorim sees it in her city, Imperatriz, at the edge of the Amazon rainforest. There, she has been advocating for human rights for over forty years. She coordinates the Padre Josimo Center for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights. We talked to her about how the climate crisis affects Imperatriz and what the center is doing about it.

Destruction in the Amazon

Imperatriz, located at the entrance to the Amazon rainforest in the Brazilian state of Maranhão, faces severe environmental challenges. The area is known for mining, illegal logging, extensive agriculture, and livestock farming—all of which contribute to significant deforestation. *“People come here to seek their fortune at the expense of nature, and the people of Imperatriz are suffering as a result,”* says Conceição.

The area's waters are polluted with garbage and pesticides, harming the fish that inhabit them and contaminating the crops irrigated by these waters. Additionally, climate change has intensified local weather patterns, leading to heavy rains that flood neighbourhoods and destroy homes

The Climate Crisis Hits Women Harder

“This leads to inequality,” says Conceição. “Women are hit harder by these problems. It’s the women who stay at home to make sure their belongings and families stay safe during floods. This causes stress and leads to extreme fatigue and mental health problems. I don’t go out for fun anymore. I’m too scared. We never know when the next flood will happen.”



Court Cases and Art Festivals

“THE PADRE JOSIMO CENTER BUILDS LEGAL CASES AGAINST POLLUTERS AND PUTS PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT TO DRAW UP ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION. RIGHT NOW, WE’RE FIGHTING A PLAN TO CREATE A NEW GARBAGE DUMP CLOSE TO THE CITY.”

In addition to their legal and political efforts, the centre also uses the power of art to engage the community and raise awareness about environmental issues. In addition to their legal and political efforts, the centre also uses the power of art to engage the community and raise awareness about environmental issues.

*“We also like to use art to make our points. Think of festivals and music performances. We use painting and pottery classes to introduce children and adolescents to things like nature conservation and climate justice. Art lets us talk about complex climate issues in a simpler and less emotionally draining way while reaching and involving more people. Support from the **Voices for Just Climate Action** programme has helped us set up lots of these playful, creative, and informative activities. But the most important achievement so far has been getting other organisations and institutions to participate in them. Likewise, working with the organisations the Voices For Just Climate Action programme introduced us to a wider network of like-minded organisations and activists. This makes us more effective”*

2. ZULMA FRANCO: PARAGUAY



VCA partner Zulma Franco is a community leader for the Ishyr Ybytoso people and a teacher in the community Virgen Santísima, in Fuerte Olimpo. She is a charismatic woman who inspires and motivates the Ishyr community and beyond.

The Background

The Ishyr Ybytoso and Tomárãho people live in the Paraguay Pantanal. They comprise an important percentage of the local population which inhabits the area. They are distributed in eight communities along the headwaters of the Paraguay River, with approximately 3,200 families.

The ancestral lands of the Ishyr Ybytoso people are more than three million hectares in the Paraguayan Pantanal. Today, they have access to only about 43 thousands of those hectares (1.5%). Four communities suffer from invasions by private landowners, and three communities still need to be restored to the Ishyr people.

Deforestation and the overexploitation of natural resources in their regions have degraded the environment. Extreme droughts and more frequent heat waves significantly impact the indigenous populations' daily lives.

“CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE WAY NATURE IS SUFFERING IS A VERY WORRYING MATTER. NOT ONLY FOR INDIGENOUS NATIONS BUT ALSO FOR THE WHOLE WORLD”

What Communities Have Done

The Ishyr communities of Fuerte Olimpo organised themselves so that they could sustainably produce on their territory. They formed associations for traditional handcraft makers, fishermen, and live-stock rangers. A cattle pond was constructed, and via a rotative system of community members, they are able to maintain their communal livestock with a silvopastoral system (way of farming that combines trees, animals, and grass on the same land). They show how people live and thrive on land without harming the environment.

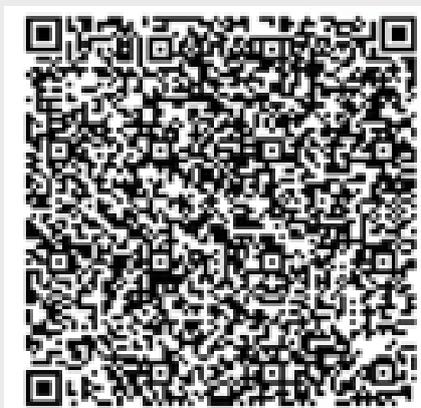
An organisation of the Ishyr communities, ‘The Union of Indigenous Communities of the Yshir Nation’ (UCINY), strives to conserve the territory and recognise and title the Ishyr ancestral territory.



Zulma's Call for Further Action

Zulma expresses the importance of the Ishyr people defending their territory and demonstrating to outsiders that the territory is under threat. Protecting ecosystems, biodiversity, and cultural wealth is fundamental to just climate action.

She emphasises that changes in the production model policies of the different nations that hold power must take place for their lands to be preserved. Their demand for resources directly fuels the environmental destruction of the Pantanal.



WANT TO SEE MORE OF ZULMA? SCAN THE CODE AND WATCH HER VIDEO!

3. HALIMA OMRI: TUNISIA

Tunisia is one of the countries most exposed to climate change. This vulnerability is primarily due to the increasing scarcity of water resources, particularly groundwater, due to drought and overuse.

The Background

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), annual rainfall is low, at just 58 mm per year, dropping to less than a hundred mm per year in the South and reaching over 700 mm per year in the North. In addition, average annual temperatures are high. This situation endangers irrigated and rain-fed crops as water resources dwindle.

In Tunisia, the agricultural sector plays a vital role in maintaining the lives of rural populations, which account for 35% of the country's population. Now, however, it is threatened by unsustainable practices and a changing climate. This leads to altered water salinity and land erosion.

More than that, women living in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to climate change due to various social, economic, environmental and cultural factors. They are increasingly more concerned about the effects of climate change than women living in urban areas, as they represent seventy percent of the agricultural workforce but only fifteen percent of the permanent workforce and eight percent of the total working population.



Halima's Story

Halima Omri, a 45-year-old local farmer from the Kesra region in Siliana, North West Tunisia, currently heads the Women's Group for Agriculture Development (WGAD) named "El Amal". Following the revolution, this women's group was founded in 2012 and specialises mainly in sheep fattening for its production. It is extending its activities to produce other products, like wool. The establishment of WGAD has contributed to creating jobs for women, gradually increasing their incomes. Nevertheless, persistent challenges loom large, encompassing access to healthcare, prevailing social conditions, and the overarching issue of climate change.

Regrettably, over the past few years, these women have faced major challenges linked to the scarcity of rain and prolonged drought, and the consequences have been felt in their production. Shortage of pasture, unavailability of hay and raw materials, and loss of grazing land leading to high raw material costs have forced members to make the difficult decision to sell their sheep.

**"THERE'S BEEN NO RAIN SINCE OCTOBER. IT'S MARCH, AND IT'S STILL NOT RAINING. IT USED TO RAIN IN NOVEMBER, SO YOU COULD SOW WHEAT SEVEN MONTHS LATER AND HARVEST, BUT NOW IT'S CHANGED. WE DON'T KNOW WHEN IT'S GOING TO RAIN, SO WE'RE HERE."
- HALIMA OMRI**

Halima's words reflect the challenges farmers in her region face due to climate change, weather uncertainty, and dependence on rainfall for agricultural success. In addition, the availability of rainwater is essential for the growth of forage crops, and its prolonged absence can seriously affect farmers' food security and livelihood. *"Growers used to be able to grow two or three tonnes of wheat on one hectare. But nowadays, it's difficult to get a 100 kg bag."*

According to Halima, the scale of the challenge posed by the scarcity of rainfall and drought also directly impacts the quantity of the harvest. Furthermore, when she mentioned that *"many people stopped growing maize because of the lack of rain"*, this highlights an alarming trend. Farmers are forced to abandon maize cultivation due to the lack of reliable rainfall, which can lead to reduced incomes and increased food insecurity within farming communities.

Perpetuating Marginalisation

Moreover, talking about gender equality, the profound inequalities between men and women in this rural environment accentuate the scale of the difficulties they face. In addition, women who inherit agricultural land are entrusted with the responsibility of managing water resources, a task closely linked to prevailing gender norms and societal views. These norms define women as the primary caregivers, homemakers, and water providers. This entrenched role effectively perpetuates their marginalised status within their family sphere and society as a whole.

This is an important next step for the climate justice work in VCA countries and the rest of the world: to have governments recognise that local communities can play an important role in combating and living with climate change. Local solutions need to be funded and scaled. People's lived experiences need to inform government policy - that way, we can create sustainable change felt by everyone.

4. NATASHA SAKALA, MARY DIMBA AND FALECY SIMWEMBELA: ZAMBIA



During a town hall meeting, WLWF Executive Director Natasha Sakala interacted with Lukolongo and Shimabala's local communities.
Photo credit: Chama Chabasungu

Women and youths, especially those in vulnerable communities, often bear the brunt of climate change impacts while simultaneously having fewer resources and opportunities to adapt. Recognising this, the Women's Life Wellness Foundation (WLWF), a local partner under the Voices for Just Climate Action programme in Zambia, supports women farmers and youths in Lukolongo and Shimabala in the Chilanga district in engaging in discussions on climate change policies.

WLWF fosters community engagement around issues of climate resilience and attempts to hold governments accountable. For example, by calling for more transparency around constituency funds.

To this end, they organised a town hall meeting in Lukolongo with local government officials to discuss the need for better governance around constituency funds. Through such platforms, women and youth hold their duty holders accountable and actively engage with policymakers on adaptation strategies around climate finance.

“I AM A WOMAN [...] WE ARE THE MOST AFFECTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE.” - MARY DIMBA

During this meeting, Mrs Mary Dimba, a local women’s mobilisation coordinator, highlighted vital gender disparities regarding the access criteria for constituency funds: “I am a woman! All those issues around constituency funds, such as clinics, access to clean and safe drinking water and schools, are centred around women. We are the most affected by climate change. We wish to get an understanding of the procedures governing the acquisition of funds for adaptation through such town hall meetings now that you, the civic leaders, are here.”



The local communities of Lukolongo and Shimabala wards interact and engage with the local community leaders of the Chilanga district and civic leaders from Kafue Town Council. Photo credit: Kondwani Thindwa

Community Empowerment

WLWF works with local communities to build climate change awareness, capacity, and resilience. Together with partners, it also organises climate mitigation and adaptation workshops, training sessions, and community dialogues to educate women and youth on their rights and the importance of climate action. Through these initiatives, it empowers the local communities to demand accountability from duty-bearers.

Disproportionate Impact on Women

WLWF also engages in advocacy and awareness campaigns to influence policy change. They collaborate with local leaders, government officials, and other stakeholders to highlight the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and youth. Their efforts have led to discussions on inclusive climate finance mechanisms and social accountability measures that consider these groups' specific needs and vulnerabilities.



Local smallholder farmers speak on gender disparities regarding the criteria governing resource allocation of Constituency Development Funds (CDF). Photo Credit: Chama Chabasungu

Community Empowerment

There have been notable successes in Chilanga and Kafue District in recent years. More women and youths are participating in decision-making processes related to climate action and resource allocation. Local initiatives for sustainable agriculture and natural resource management gained traction, benefiting both the environment and the community's livelihoods.



Falecy Simwembela shares their local initiatives, such as sustainable agriculture and natural resource management, during a town hall meeting with Panos in Lukolong. Photo credit: Chama Chabasungu

During the meeting, Falecy Simwembela shared that she is happy because most of the women in her community have embarked on identifying lasting solutions that will enable them to improve their agriculture activities and even support their children in school despite the impact of climate change. *“The men don’t want us to own our land. They feel intimidated with our resilience and resourcefulness. With our interactions, learning and sharing experience with WLWF, we, the women, are being equipped with the knowledge and skills on how to approach and hold our duty bearers responsible for land through such platforms as this town hall meeting.”*

5. YULIANA: INDONESIA



Yuliana travels through Indonesia with the innovative action group "Geng Motor Imut" to raise awareness about climate change and sustainability. The effects of climate change are noticeable wherever she looks. "The weather is getting warmer, water reserves are drying up, the rainfall is erratic, and droughts last longer. This year, Kefa City has been intensely hot. Just five years ago, it tended to be cool from the afternoon until morning. But now, it's hot all day," she says.

Dry Spells

Yuliana (27) is a passionate young climate activist from the Kefamenanu in Indonesia. She is very worried about the impact of climate change on farmers in her country. "The dry spells are getting longer, so more and more harvests are failing. Then there was the devastating Seroja cyclone this spring that made some farmers not only lose their crops but also left them homeless."

Saplings to the Rescue

Yuliana advocates for reforestation with climate-resistant trees and plants to cope with the climate crisis. “I try to convince people how important this is. The trees retain water and prevent soil erosion.” Working with Geng Motor Imut and BPDAS (Central Management of Regional River Flow), she is distributing tree saplings that can be planted to speed up the process of reforestation. “In this way, we can slow down rising temperatures, and farmers will have good harvests again,” Yuliana says.



Yuliana travels through Indonesia to raise awareness about the climate. Photo: Mohammad Tsani Pebrian | Hivos

Yuliana hopes to be able to get as many people as possible to join her reforestation efforts.

“NO MORE HUNGER FROM CROP FAILURES, NO MORE DRIED UP RIVERS: THAT IS MY GOAL. BUT THAT WILL ONLY WORK IF MORE PEOPLE ARE COMMITTED TO THE CLIMATE AND OUR PLANET. IF PEOPLE LIKE YOU AND ME, WHO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK ON THIS, DON’T EVEN TRY, WHO WILL?”

6. LEANDRA MIGUEL: BOLIVIA



In the community of Taiguati, nestled in the heart of the Gran Chaco Americano, a group of brave and determined women have united to forge a path towards progress. Led by Leandra Miguel, second Zonal Chief of the APG Villa Montes and president of the Association of Women Producers, these women are the pillars of the Huerto El Milagro project.

Women of Taiguati Transform Their Community through the Huerto El Milagro Project and Digital Connectivity

Taiguati, Gran Chaco Americano – In the community of Taiguati, a group of brave and determined women is forging a path towards progress and self-sufficiency. Led by Leandra Miguel, second Zonal Chief of the APG Villa Montes and president of the Association of Women Producers, these women are the pillars of the Huerto El Milagro project, an initiative that not only ensures vegetable production but also tackles the challenges of climate change with innovative solutions.

Taiguati is known as one of the main suppliers of vegetables for Villa Montes and its surroundings. However, the community faces daily challenges to ensure food security and maintain their productive activities in an increasingly changing climate. To mitigate these challenges, they have implemented a water harvesting system that allows them to collect the necessary water for their production.

Leandra and her group have taken control of their future, working side by side to cultivate their gardens and experiment with innovative climate change adaptation techniques. Aware that they need more to thrive, they have found an ally in the NANUM Center. This connectivity center provides internet access and training opportunities in information and communication technologies to more than 700 inhabitants of Taiguati.



With the support of the NANUM Center, the women of the community are acquiring digital literacy skills and learning to use technological tools to enhance their entrepreneurship. They have created a Facebook page to market their products, allowing them to reach a wider market and establish direct connections with their customers. Gradually, their garden is growing and gaining recognition in the region.

But they don't stop there. Leandra and her group understand that success not only depends on vegetable production but also on their ability to adapt and stay updated in a constantly evolving world.

Today, the group of women from Taiguati continues their fight for a better future. They have overcome obstacles, strengthened their community, and demonstrated that unity and empowerment can make a real difference. Their story is a testament to the transformative power that emerges when women unite to face challenges and build a prosperous future for themselves and future generations.

7. QUIDIAN, DAYANA, ANA MARÍA, MARISOL AND MARITZA: BOLIVIA



Quidian, Dayana, Ana María, Marisol and Maritza. Photos: Mauricio Mendez | SBDA & WWF-Bolivia & FGutierrez / WWF-Bolivia

Nestled in the Puerto Suarez region, the community of Motacusito and San San Salvador emerges as a vibrant example of how togetherness, female empowerment and environmental conservation can converge in a symphony of hope and sustainability. In 2019, in Motacusito a group of four courageous and visionary women have led a quiet revolution; Quidian Roman, Ana Maria Tomichá, Marisol Román Méndez and Dayana Espinoza have pushed for water spring conservation and ecotourism. Through a comprehensive approach that encompasses education, awareness and collaboration with various organizations, these women have managed to transform their community and preserve a priceless natural treasure. The commitment of the women of the community has led to the declaration of Motacusito as a protected area, and their legacy shines as a beacon of inspiration in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation.

Sowing the seeds of change

The seed of transformation was planted with the community ecotourism study, which revealed Motacusito's natural wealth and its potential for sustainable development. This revelation served as a catalyst for the formation of the women's group, whose commitment to the protection of natural resources resonated deeply. Armed with education and motivation, these women set out on a mission to promote the site's conservation, joining forces to channel their passion toward building a future in harmony with nature.

Reasons for protection: a glimpse of Motacusito's jewels

The initiative to declare Motacusito a protected area is not the result of chance, but a solid response to the values and challenges facing the community. The fragility of the ecosystem and the need for proper management top the list of reasons. However, the heart of the matter lies in the water and the biological richness that this corner shelters. The majesty of its rock formations, stalactites, and stalagmites, add even more value to this natural jewel.

"Thanks to the interest shown by the community and by those of us who work in ecotourism. This helped us to show the municipality that there was a real interest within the community to work on conservation issues. For a long time, we submitted requests to the municipality to have our area declared protected but were unsuccessful with previous efforts. However, with the support of the current autonomous municipal government, this objective was achieved. We also received significant help from the SBDA and WWF, who helped us with studies that demonstrated that Motacusito is a crucial area for the water recharge that feeds the Bay. These springs are within the protected area, which adds to the natural attraction of the region.

Within this area, there is a cave, a place where there is water that drains and reaches Laguna Cáceres. This was a crucial factor that the municipality recognized as important, which contributed to our area finally being declared protected. Of course, it was also fundamental to communicate and inform the community about the importance of conservation. By understanding its importance, the community became more willing to support our efforts to protect the area (Quidian Román, Vice-president of the community)".



Quidian Román, Vice-president of the community. Photo: Mauricio Mendez | SBDA / WWF-Bolivia

Challenges and determination: a cobblestone road to protection

The road to protection was not without obstacles. The most prominent challenge was community awareness of the benefits of sustainable tourism. Overcoming resistance and promoting a long-term mindset proved to be an arduous task. In addition, the lack of initial support from municipal and government authorities in other administrations compounded the difficulty. The struggle for cleanliness and access to the cave in rainy seasons added another layer of challenge. However, the perseverance of the women and the intervention of organizations and NGOs were the compass that guided their steps and allowed them to overcome these difficulties.

A bright future: sustainability and inheritance for generations to come

The achievement of the declaration as a protected area does not mark the end, but the beginning of a promising path. Motacusito stands as a beacon of conservation and community empowerment. Future includes increased public awareness, regulations that safeguard the ecosystem, and shared management of income and benefits between the community and the municipality. The vision of sustainable tourism that is harmonious with nature shines on the horizon, fueled by the passion, leadership, and love of the land of these women.



Promulgation of the protected area "Motacusito" by the Mayor of Puerto Suarez. Photo: Ana María Tomichá



Entrance to the eco-pedagogical forest. Photo: Fundación Socio Ambiental Semilla

A call to action

But in the Pantanal region there are more women leaders and this is also Maritza's example. In December 2023, activities in the San Salvador community took an exciting turn through the Las Caluchitas Association (of women users of totaí derivatives), led by Maritza Cayú Chuez.

Maritza, a woman who fights for local conservation, embarked on an ambitious project with the support of the SEMILLA Foundation and the NbS small grants program of the Voices for Just Climate Action - VCA project with the objective of strengthening the sustainable use of totaí and promoting environmental education in her community. Their vision encompassed not only the protection of the forest, but also the economic empowerment of the women of Las Caluchitas.

The women of Las Caluchitas, known for their entrepreneurship in the production of totaí oil and its derivatives, came together with enthusiasm to improve their facilities and capabilities. Together, they have promoted the construction of a space for processing and storing these fruits of the forest, while receiving training in production and commercial management.

The project, which was born with a lot of energy and enthusiasm, is driving a greater challenge: to achieve a future where the children of San Salvador learn to love and protect their natural environment. With the help of local schools, it has achieved the creation of the Ecopedagogical Forest through a communal rule, where the wooded area neighboring the community has become a space for more children and young people to learn about the functioning of the forest, its components, roles and, particularly, about the totaí and its benefits. The Caluchitas will now not only produce oil more efficiently; they have now become guardians of the eco-pedagogical forest, teaching children and youth about the importance of preserving their home.

The journey does not end there, Maritza and Las Caluchitas are working to strengthen community governance, creating a local management platform that will promote inclusive participation in the preservation of the forest and the well-being of the community. With each step, with each drop of totaí oil produced, with each child discovering the magic of the eco-pedagogical forest, the community of San Salvador grew stronger in its resilience, in its love of nature and in its commitment to a sustainable future.

The stories of these women leaders resonate as a call to action in a world facing climate and environmental challenges. In a scenario where environmental degradation seems inevitable, these women have demonstrated that community power and female leadership can make a difference. The union of education, awareness and collaboration has preserved a natural treasure and promoted sustainability. These leaders are an inspiring example and living proof that change is within everyone's reach, if only we dare to take the path toward conserving and protecting our environment.

"We have a lot of work ahead of us because our goal is to turn this place into a conservation area where we take care of our resources (Quidian Román, Vice-president of the Motacusito community)".



Bolivian Pantanal. Photo: Mauricio Méndez | SBDA / WWF-Bolivia

Voices For Just Climate Action

We collaborate with these women through our Voices for Climate Action programme. The programme aims to ensure that local civil society and underrepresented groups take a central role as creators, facilitators, and advocates of innovative climate solutions that benefit both people and nature. We support them in organizing and campaigning effectively and provide a network where they can reinforce each other. Additionally, the programme works to create widespread societal and financial support for these locally-driven climate solutions.



Proud alliance partners:

