

Sisters on the Planet

Four inspirational women and the
fight against climate change

Foreword



There are a lot of reasons to feel inspired by the Sisters on the Planet—Sahena, Sharon, Muriel, and Martina.

There's their enthusiasm, their commitment, and their dedication. There's the impact they are having on the people around them. And there's their shared understanding that climate change can't be ignored.

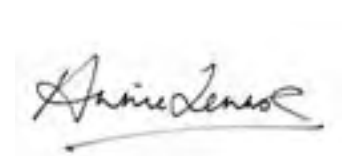
But maybe the most inspiring thing about these four women is the simple fact that they've chosen to fight. Each of them are affected very differently by climate change, but they've all decided to do whatever they can in their own lives to put a stop to it. Ignoring the problem clearly isn't an option in their eyes.

Their stories give us the chance to understand how and why women are being hit hardest by climate change. But they also show what can be achieved when you combine the belief that change is possible with the determination to make it happen.

The Sisters' stories are stories of inspiration. It's up to all of us to use this inspiration, changing our own lives and encouraging our friends and families—and the politicians who act in our names—to make a difference, too. It's up to all of us to carry forward what the Sisters have started.



Angelique Kidjo



Annie Lennox

Introduction

It's worth getting one thing straight from the outset. As obvious as it sounds, climate change affects everybody. That means men, women, children—and all those polar bears you've seen in the photos. We're all in this together.

But if you remember one thing about Sisters on the Planet, make it this: Climate change is already having a disproportionate impact on poor people in the US and abroad, and it's hitting women hardest.

It's not the easiest idea to understand. After all, everyone gets affected during a flood. But changes in weather and extreme weather events are being felt most in poor communities. This is because poor people rely more on natural resources, are more vulnerable to disaster, and have fewer ways to protect themselves. And because women tend to do the jobs that are most affected by changes in weather, they are feeling the greatest pressure.

For example, in developing countries it tends to be women who grow the family's food, collect fuel and water, and bring up the children. So when clean water becomes harder to find during a drought, or when crops are destroyed by floods, it's up to women to find solutions. And as the weather becomes increasingly uncertain in many places, that can feel like a near-impossible task.

Men are badly hit too, of course, but because they tend to do fewer jobs that rely on natural resources, they are usually in a much stronger position to cope and rebuild their lives. They are also more likely to be educated, to have savings, and to have skills to earn money. And if there is no work locally, they are able to migrate to other areas to find it.

So it's actually fairly simple. Climate change is hitting women hardest by exacerbating inequalities that already exist. It's a problem that the four women featured in Sisters on the Planet are well aware of. But it's also one that they are determined to overcome.

These are stories of inspiration, of hope, and of the power of people to bring about change.

Sahena, Sharon, Muriel, and Martina might have very different lives, but what they share is a certainty that progress only comes about when you stand up and make your voice heard.

We all need to face up to climate change in the same way as the Sisters on the Planet, so their stories are also a rallying cry. After all, we are all in this together, which means we are all a part of the solution. That's an empowering situation, and one that means we can build a better future.

That future starts now.

Sahena's story

Even in Bangladesh, a country hit by floods and cyclones with punishing regularity, few people can have encountered a force of nature quite like Sahena Begum. Fiercely determined, she is spearheading community efforts to cope with changing weather in Kunderpara village. And though the annual monsoon rains are getting heavier and more unpredictable—last year's floods were the worst in decades, affecting nine million people—her efforts are bringing about enormous progress.

"We are not born to suffer," she says. "We are born to fight."

In Bangladesh it's usually women who collect water and fuel, grow and prepare food, and care for their families—all tasks that become more difficult when disaster strikes. So Sahena, elected president of the local women's committee, is helping women—and therefore the wider community—to adapt and prepare for flooding.

"If women are aware, then families can be saved from many losses," she says. "Diseases can be avoided, poultry can be saved, the children are properly looked after and don't suffer from diseases, and the women themselves are saved from a lot of suffering."

Sahena, who completed a course on disaster protection run by Oxfam's local partner, Gana Unnayan Kendra, encourages members of

the committee to store portable clay ovens and wood in high places, to use during floods. She also helps them to grow and preserve vegetables, and to keep seeds that can be planted when crops are destroyed. Vital work is also taking place to help people raise the foundations of their homes above flood levels. Sahena describes the process involved as "not difficult," adding that "even if it were, we don't tend to think in that way. Because this is a fight against disaster, so we are not overpowered."

It's not an easy fight—the women are better prepared than ever, but the floods are getting worse—but Sahena is understandably proud that people now come to her for advice. Getting to this stage hasn't been easy.

"At the beginning many people in my family did not support me," she says. "My husband and my husband's brother tried to stop me." Undeterred, she refused to remain silent, and she now ensures that women make time to discuss issues that affect them and have a voice in community decisions.

With Sahena leading the way, attitudes about climate change—and about women—are changing in Kunderpara. She knows the difference one person can make, and having left school at the age of 7, she now presses parents to educate their daughters.

As she says today, "Just imagine what I could have done if I had an education."



As the majority of the world's poor people, women suffer most when erratic weather brings drought or flood to the marginal land or crowded urban areas where most poor people live.¹ In Bangladesh, the 1991 cyclone and flood killed 71 of every 1,000 women, compared with 15 of every 1,000 men.²

“We are not born to suffer. We are born to fight.”



Main picture: Storing clay ovens (like the one Sahena is making) in high places makes cooking much easier during floods. **Top:** Members of the women's committee meet to discuss their concerns. **Above:** Sahena and her husband tend crops near their home. *Amin / Oxfam*

¹ "Women: Essential to climate change solutions," fact sheet (New York: Women's Environment & Development Organization [WEDO]).

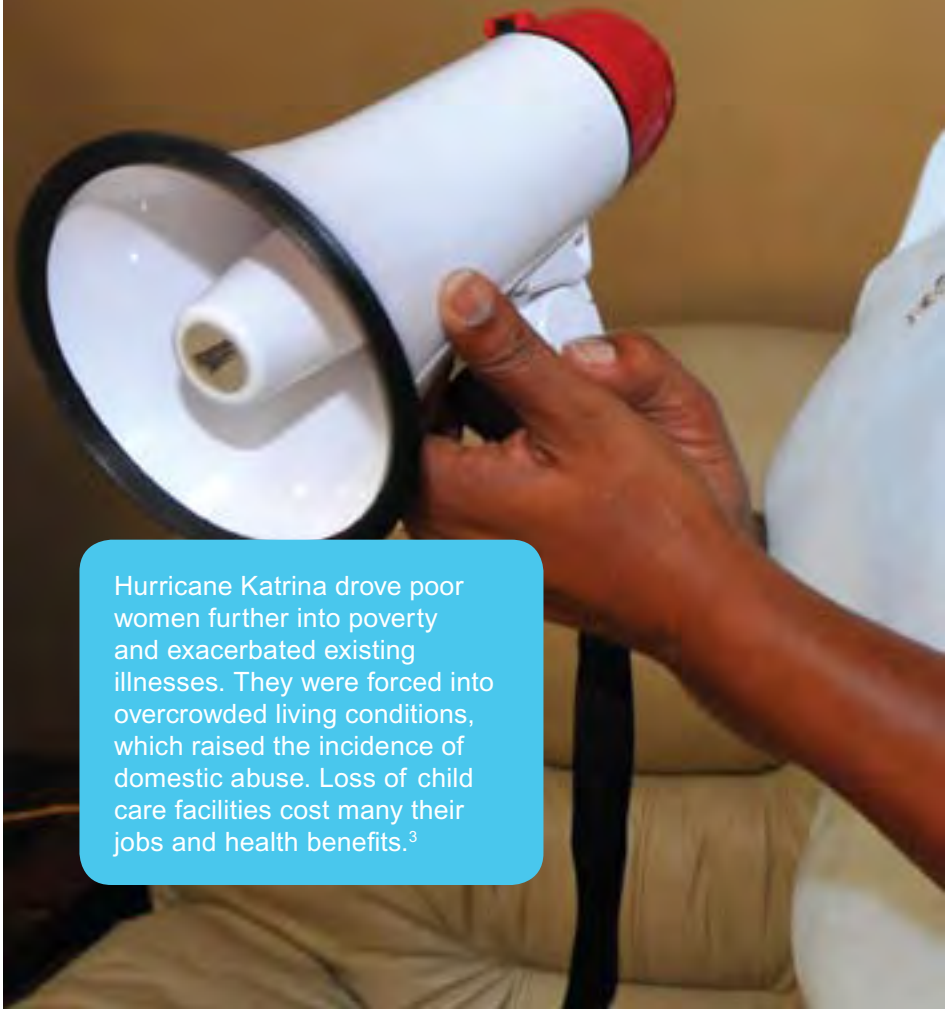
² Joni Seager and Betsy Hartmann, "Mainstreaming gender in environmental assessment and early warning" (Nairobi, Kenya: UN Environment Program, 2005).



Main picture: Sharon keeps a bullhorn in her living room for election times, when she walks the streets urging people to vote. **Top:** Children in the care of one of CWC's in-home child care providers. **Above:** Sharon leads a regular meeting of CWC members. *Liliana Rodriguez / Oxfam America*

³ Avis A. Jones-DeWeever, "Women in the wake of the storm: Examining the post-Katrina realities of the women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast" (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2007).

“ Women are the leaders. ”



Hurricane Katrina drove poor women further into poverty and exacerbated existing illnesses. They were forced into overcrowded living conditions, which raised the incidence of domestic abuse. Loss of child care facilities cost many their jobs and health benefits.³



Sharon's story

Sharon Hanshaw, a lifelong resident of Biloxi, Mississippi, knows what it's like to start over. She lost her house, her car, and her hairdressing salon when Hurricane Katrina devastated the US Gulf Coast in August 2005. For the next 18 months, she shuttled between family members' homes and a government-issued trailer, which she says contained toxins that harmed her health.

During those difficult days, Sharon joined a group of women meeting together—first in a funeral home, then in a church—to talk about what they'd been through. The women shared the same concerns about their community: The government was pouring millions in renovation funds into Biloxi's big shoreline casinos, but low-income residents had few options for affordable, permanent housing.

With support from Oxfam America, these women formed a grassroots organization called Coastal Women for Change (CWC). Sharon—who combines boundless energy, a talent for organizing, and a natural way with people—started as its secretary and eventually became executive director.

"Women are the leaders, whether they're at the head or not," she says. "Their voices need to be heard."

CWC began by training women, low-income residents, and people of color to speak out during the recovery process. As the group evolved, members realized that in addition to advocating solutions, they had to create some of their own. They came up with ways to address the wide range of problems facing their community, from

creating child care options to preparing for the next, inevitable storm.

Since most day care centers closed after Katrina, single moms had to either quit their jobs or leave their young children at home alone. In response, CWC trained members to work as in-home child care providers. "That's what we're about here: family, community," Sharon says. "We help each other out."

But even after the women returned to work, they still worried about safeguarding their families. More intense storms, as well as rising sea levels, mean that coastal communities like Biloxi are among the most vulnerable to climate change.

"We can't just wait until another Katrina happens. We have to be really focused," Sharon says. "We already have an action plan."

CWC decided to focus on disaster preparation by partnering with a local transit company to arrange for buses to bring people to storm shelters. They plan to distribute storm preparedness kits that include flashlights and insurance papers to seniors and families. And they're advocating for the city government to include low-income neighborhoods in its comprehensive evacuation plan.

Sharon, who moved into a new house in early 2008, says she'll always be haunted by what she lost in the storm. But she's quick to point out that solutions are close at hand—if people can work together.

"Climate change is real, and we've got to do something," she says. "It's all of our problem."



Main picture: Muriel addresses representatives of traditional Brazilian communities in Salvador, Brazil.

Top: Working in her office, watched over by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. **Above:** Taking time to enjoy her garden at home in Brasília. "I wither if I have to stay inside a closed room." *Tatiana Cardeal / Oxfam*

⁴ A recent study in Sweden showed that women's carbon footprint is smaller than men's: women account for only 25 percent of car usage, and only one-third own cars (Gerd Johnson-Latham, "Do women leave a smaller ecological footprint than men?" [study cited by Johnson-Latham at Report of High Level Roundtable: How a Changing Climate Affects Women, New York, Sept. 21, 2007]).

⁵ WEDO, "Global warming—and its cures—have a woman's face," media advisory, July 10, 2008.



“All of us have to play our part.”

Women's carbon footprint has been shown to be smaller than men's.⁴ At the same time, women have led many of the most innovative responses to environmental challenges.⁵



Muriel's story

When Muriel Saragoussi arrived for her first day working at the Environment Ministry in Brasilia, Brazil, she started by opening the windows and blinds in her new office, “so that people could see me when I was there—what I was doing and how I was doing things.” It’s a small act, but very typical of her commitment, as the ministry’s head of extractivism, to involving people in her work and leading by example. “If we don’t act in a certain way in our lives,” she says, “it’s useless to ask others to act in similar ways.”

Endlessly and infectiously energetic, Muriel has been passionate about green issues since she was a teenager. She now spends much of her time travelling through Brazil, seeing firsthand the impacts of climate change on traditional communities and encouraging people to take action. She is already very familiar with the issues that inspired the Sisters on the Planet project.

“When things go wrong, women suffer the impact,” she says. “If there is no money, no food, if something is lacking, they are the ones who have to provide for their children. Climate change will bring instability to people’s lives, and

women will have to deal with this shock and instability.”

Of particular concern is the effect changing weather has on farming. She has heard many stories about unpredictable weather making growing crops far more difficult. As Muriel says, “People have deep relations with natural resources.”

Anything but pessimistic, however, Muriel lives her life as if it were a constant and impassioned fight against climate change. Hers is an influential voice, and she strives to use it to ensure that women’s needs are taken into account in all environmental policies. She also puts her principles into practice in her private life, as she owns a self-built, eco-friendly house in Manaus.

Ultimately, Muriel believes that whatever we do, inaction isn’t an option. “If you’re on a boat that’s sinking, it’s useless to say it is somebody else’s fault,” she says. “Everybody on board will sink, so we are all responsible for something. All of us have to play our part.”

Martina's story

For Martina Longom in Caicaoan village in Karamoja, northeastern Uganda, the disappearance of the elele bird is yet another sign that strange things are happening to the weather. "In our parents' time," she says, "the elele bird would come and sing, signaling the rain."

Everyone would then join together to turn to cultivation. "Now," she continues, "we don't see the bird. We don't know when to cultivate and when to sow. For the last three years the rain was late. In two of them there wasn't enough rain for the sorghum [a local crop] to grow. And then last year the rains came as a flood."

The weather has never been perfectly predictable in Uganda—no more than it is anywhere else—but in the last few years it has become increasingly unreliable, making life much more difficult for people, like Martina, who rely on farming to survive.

In early 2008, six months after the worst floods in Uganda in 35 years destroyed much of the harvest, her family's grain store sits empty. To feed her family, Martina is trying to earn a living by collecting water and firewood for people in the nearest town.

But she must also care for her family alone, as her husband is spending

several weeks away from home tending to their cattle at Longor (the nearest grazing spot in the dry season). The lack of food and milk is making her children ill, and collecting wood is becoming more difficult.

"We travel further and further for firewood every year, and it takes us to less safe places," she explains. Deforestation is one of many problems that the local women's group in Caicaoan is working to resolve.

Members have planted evergreen and mango trees to replace the ones cut down for fuel and charcoal—a highly successful scheme that is also reducing erosion and helping people to earn an income. And because water is becoming harder to find, members have successfully campaigned for and helped to build a borehole. Instead of walking for up to seven hours to collect water, the women now make a 30-minute round trip.

Martina is looking forward to joining the women's group, and she keenly supports their work to safeguard supplies of water, wood, and food. And she is a strong advocate of the role education can play in the fight against climate change. As she succinctly puts it, "Education gives us alternatives."





“Education gives
us alternatives.”

Women carry water, gather wood for fuel, and manage household resources worldwide. They are also the chief caregivers for victims of weather-related and other natural disasters.⁶



Main picture: The women's group's successful campaign to have a borehole installed has made Martina's journey to collect water much shorter. **Top:** Martina and other women from the village set out to collect firewood.

Above: Martina carrying her bundle of firewood, which she will sell. A tree-planting scheme is helping to combat deforestation in the area. *Geoff Sayer / Oxfam*

⁶“Women: Essential to climate change solutions,” fact sheet (New York: WEDO).

Become a Sister on the Planet (or a Brother, if that's easier)

It's time for you to tell your story. So talk to people about Sisters, get them to do the same, and you'll line up alongside Sahena, Sharon, Muriel, and Martina in the growing ranks of people taking on climate change.

Then visit www.oxfamamerica.org/sisters and tell us what you're doing.

Share the DVD

Organize an event locally to show the DVD (attached to the back cover of this booklet) and talk about Sisters. Arrange a screening at your work, school, or place of worship.

Run for Congress

Well, you could. Or if you're a bit busy, you could call your members of Congress and urge them to speak out about the importance of addressing the needs of the poorest women who are at greatest risk.

Join the Climate Change Action Team

Help Oxfam America cultivate change and make our world a better place. As part of our online action team, you'll be given easy ways to educate your friends, your family, Congress, the president, and the media about the effects of climate change on women. Go to www.oxfamamerica.org/sisters to join.

Design a T-shirt or banner

International Women's Day is March 8. Raise awareness in your community by designing a T-shirt or banner with a focus on gender and climate change. Encourage others in your community to do the same. Send pictures to your local newspaper or Congressional members.

Educate yourself: Learn more about the issue.

Go to www.oxfamamerica.org/sisters.

Conclusion

At the moment, the Sisters on the Planet booklet in your hands is a fairly small thing. But follow the examples of the people in it, and it'll grow and grow.

It'll create a groundswell, a surge of action, a movement. And that movement, just like Sahena, Sharon, Muriel, and Martina, will bring about genuine change.

You've seen what can happen when you get involved in community groups, when you educate others about the impact of climate change on poor people's lives, when you get on politicians' cases to make sure that the links between climate change and poverty aren't forgotten, and when you adapt your own life to make sure it's sustainable.

You've seen that all of us can do something, and you've seen that ultimately, we all need to come together to work for a better future. We're all connected by our shared humanity, and by doing the right things now, we can steer our planet in the right direction.

Together we can fight climate change and be part of the solution.

www.oxfamamerica.org/sisters

It's time to press play...

Sisters
on the
Planet

By creating a ripple effect that gets bigger and bigger and bigger, we can turn the planet around...
And hopefully now you'll want to **open people's eyes** to how climate change is affecting women's lives. **It's up to all of us to join Sahena, Sharon, Muriel, and Martina.**
And so we arrive at the back page, and the point where we want to turn heads. It's good to **see things in a different way**—hopefully the Sisters' stories have helped you to do just that.



Oxfam
America

226 Causeway Street, 5th Floor
Boston, MA 02114-2206
(800) 77-OXFAM
www.oxfamamerica.org

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