

Learning Brief | July 2025

Engaging Climate Champions to Strengthen Community Preparedness and Response

Insights from Pathfinder's Women-led Climate Resilience Program in Bangladesh and Pakistan





Climate champions training on climate and gender in Sanghar district, Pakistan, 2023.

Summary

From 2022 to 2025, Pathfinder International has led the **Advancing the Leadership of Women and Girls Towards Better Health and Climate Change Resilience** project in Bangladesh and Pakistan. This women-led climate resilience project has engaged volunteer **climate champions (CC)** in both countries,¹ strengthening their capacity to assist communities in disaster planning and response. CCs bridge their communities, government, and non-governmental stakeholders to bolster resilience and increase climate and health awareness. They play an important role in informing their communities about the frequency and nature of climate disasters, their effects on families and communities, and how to stay safe and healthy during them. CCs are community-level first responders and advocates, ensuring links to safe shelters and health services in times of emergency.

This learning brief showcases the project's tailored approach in each country; describes key characteristics of each country's CC cohort; and shares practical implementation lessons to guide future replication, adaptation, and scale of this approach.

¹ The Pakistan program referred to them as "climate champions", while the Bangladesh referred to them as "resilience volunteers." In this brief, we will use the term "climate champions" to refer to the cohorts in both country programs.

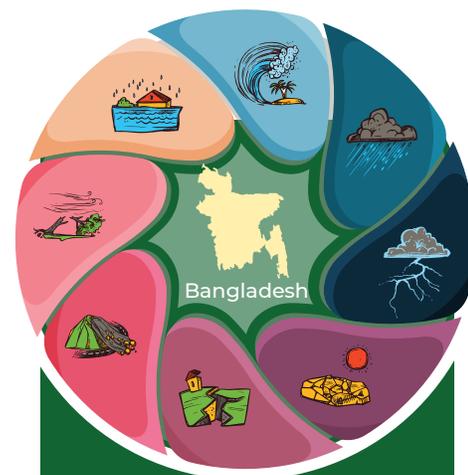
Background

Climate change is among the most pressing issues Bangladesh and Pakistan face in the 21st century: Bangladesh ranks seventh and Pakistan ranks eighth on the Long-Term Global Climate Risk Index of countries most affected by climate change from 2000 to 2019.² In Bangladesh, deforestation, heat waves, tropical cyclones, floods, and rising sea level and salinity in coastal areas have contributed to US\$3.72 billion in economic losses—including displacement, loss of crops, and contamination of drinking water—over those two decades.³ In Pakistan, extreme heat has intensified the monsoon season, exacerbating flooding in much of the country while also contributing to severe droughts. Hot temperatures harden the soil, hindering its ability to drain monsoon rain and worsening flooding. In 2022 alone, catastrophic floods killed nearly 1,800 people, displaced 7.9 million, and caused US\$15 billion in damage.⁴

Persistent gender inequality in both countries means that women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change. Climate emergencies exacerbate already-widespread gender-based violence (GBV); harmful traditional practices like child, early, and forced marriage and union; and gender differentials in educational opportunities when girls are enlisted to stay home from school to help their households through climate-induced economic instability and food insecurity. Extreme heat, pollution, and water- and vector-borne illnesses stoked by climate change threaten women's and girls' health and wellbeing. At the same time, damage to health facilities caused by flooding and other climate disasters further hinders women's and girls' access to quality health care, putting them at increased risk for complications in pregnancy and childbirth.⁵

A leading voice for climate-vulnerable countries, Bangladesh was among the first to develop a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan in 2009—one of many policies and investments that leverage community action to strengthen climate resilience.⁶ Pakistan developed its first National Climate Change Policy in 2012, also focused on resilience and adaptation. And both countries released National Adaptation Plans integrating climate adaptation into national development processes in 2023. Meaningful implementation of these and related policies and plans requires everyone's engagement—from national to local grassroots levels—in strengthening their countries' climate resilience. It is particularly crucial to involve those most affected by climate change—including women and girls—in creating and implementing solutions to the pressing challenges their countries face.

Bangladesh ranks 7th and Pakistan ranks 8th on the Long-Term Global Climate Risk Index.



Common Climate Hazards



Bangladesh developed its **Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan** in **2009**.

Pakistan developed its **National Climate Policy** in **2012**.

² David Eckstein, Vera Kunzel, and Laura Schafer, "Global Climate Risk Index 2021: Who Suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? Weather-Related Loss Events in 2019 and 2000-2019" (Bonn, Germany: GermanWatch, January 2021).

³ Diego Rojas, "How the Climate Crisis Is Impacting Bangladesh" (The Climate Reality Project, December 9, 2021), <https://www.climateRealityProject.org/blog/how-climate-crisis-impacting-bangladesh>.

⁴ Amin Ahmed, "Natural Disasters Caused 30,000 Deaths, \$22 Bn Losses in 2022," Dawn, March 20, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1743174#:~:text=The%20toll%20was%20relatively%20lower.>

⁵ "Climate Change in South Asia: The Cases of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India" (European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS), July 2023).

⁶ "Key Highlights: Country Climate and Development Report for Bangladesh" (World Bank Group, October 31, 2022), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/10/31/key-highlights-country-climate-and-development-report-for-bangladesh>.



Ms. Sakiba Begum, a community mobilizer, co-facilitates a courtyard knowledge-sharing session with the women's group in Sardar's village community, Jalalabad Union, Sylhet Sadar sub-district in Bangladesh, 2024.

Advancing the Leadership of Women and Girls Towards Better Health and Climate Change Resilience

In response to this need, Pathfinder implemented the **Advancing the Leadership of Women and Girls Towards Better Health and Climate Change Resilience** project in Bangladesh and Pakistan from 2022 to 2025. Supported by the Takeda Pharmaceutical Company Limited, Global Corporate Social Responsibility program, this project—locally known as **Dishari in Bangladesh and Surmi in Pakistan**—centers women as change agents, giving them the tools, knowledge, networks, and resources to improve access to quality health services, build a foundation for economic growth, and strengthen community and health system resilience to shocks.

This project has three implementing partners in Bangladesh



People's Oriented
Program Implementation



Friends In Village
Development Bangladesh



Young Power in
Social Action

and six implementing partners in Pakistan



Health and
Nutrition
Development
Society



Hamdam
Foundation



National
Disability &
Development
Forum



Sukaar
Foundation



Sindh
Community
Foundation



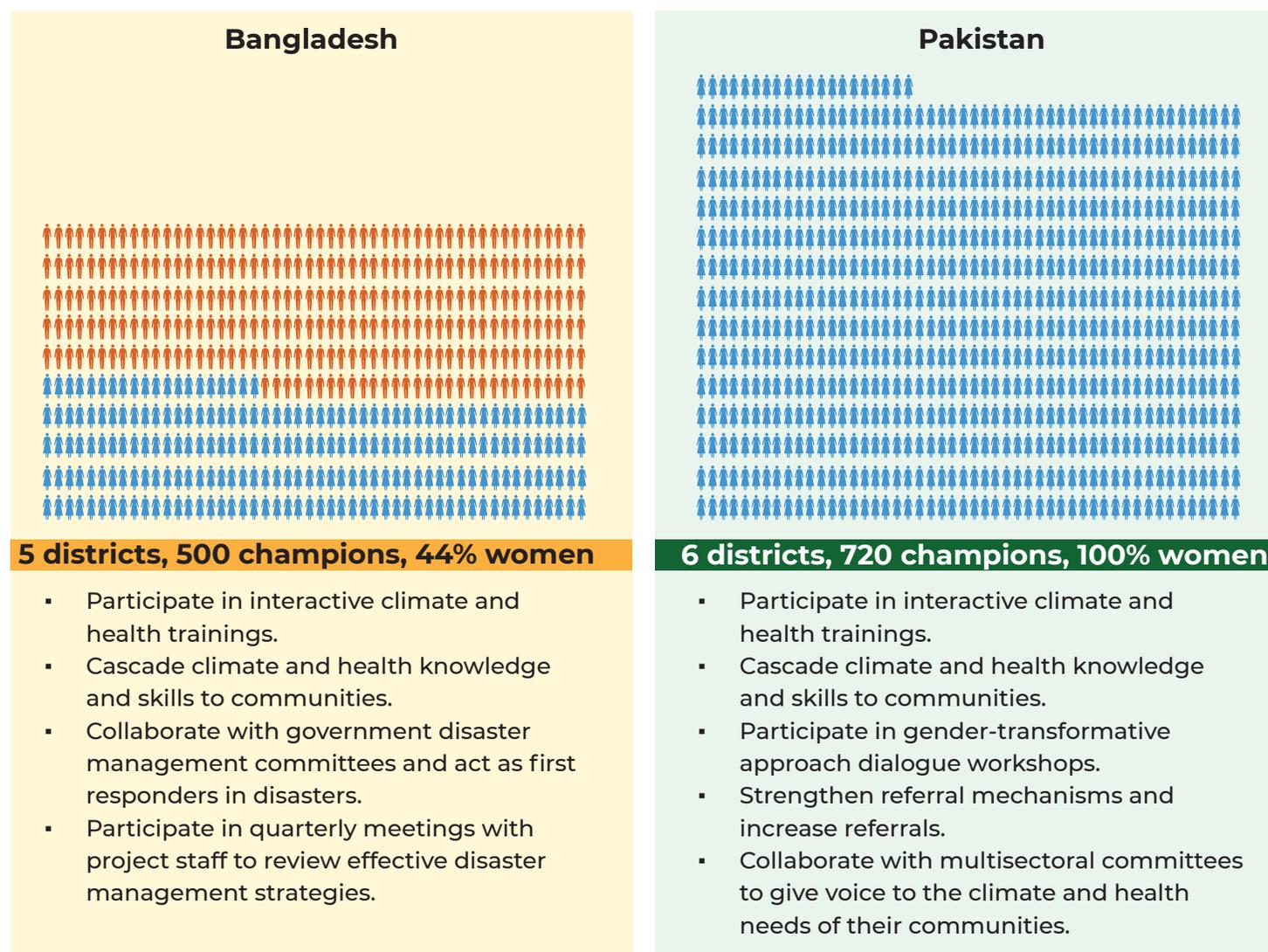
NGO's
Development
Society

Climate champions

The project engaged **climate champions** in both countries, strengthening their disaster preparedness and response capacity to aid their communities in high-level disaster planning and crisis response. CCs bridge their communities, government, and non-governmental stakeholders to bolster resilience and increase climate and health awareness. They play an important role in informing their communities about the frequency and nature of climate disasters, their effects on families and communities, and how to stay safe and healthy during emergencies. CCs are community-level first responders and advocates, ensuring links to safe shelters and health services in times of crisis.

Differences in the approach to recruitment and scope of work of the CCs between Bangladesh and Pakistan arose from the need to tailor the project to each country's unique government structures, priorities, and climate resilience efforts. For example, the Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MODMR) Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD)⁷ places high value on diversity of volunteers, including

Figure 1. Scope of climate champions program in Bangladesh and Pakistan



⁷ "Standing Orders on Disaster 2019" (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, n.d.), https://modmr.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/modmr.portal.gov.bd/policies/7a9f5844_76c0_46f6_9d8a_5e176d2510b9/SOD%202019%20_English_FINAL.pdf.



A woman from Umerkot, Sindh, Pakistan, presents group work during Gender-Transformative Approach workshop, 2024.

by gender. Therefore, while this project focused on women’s leadership, we also recruited men champions in Bangladesh to align with government priorities. While we aimed for a gender balance, recruiting women was a challenge in certain areas due to safety concerns and cultural barriers, including conservative mindsets that limited women’s participation.

The Bangladesh MODMR’s SOD outlines the critical roles of volunteers at the district, sub-district (upazila), and union levels. In alignment with the SOD, the project team worked at the union level in Bangladesh to recruit men and women ages 18 to 48 who lived in and were native to one of the 20 implementation upazilas; had prior volunteer experience with the government, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), the United Nations, Red Crescent, or similar entities; and were willing to serve their community on a volunteer basis. The goal was to (1) onboard 20 CCs for each of the 15 participating upazilas in Sylhet, Sunamganj, Netrokona, and Kishoreganj, and 40 CCs for each of the 5 participating upazilas in Cox’s Bazar (ideally half women and half men), and (2) align the CC program with the government’s existing process by creating CC groups at the union level. Once the 500 CCs were recruited, the project team informed the government, who acknowledged the cohort and uploaded the list to its upazila-level websites.

In Pakistan, the project team partnered with six community-based organizations (CBOs) in six climate-affected districts, five in Sindh and one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Through these partnerships, the project recruited women ages 18 to 55 who were literate and possessed a strong understanding of their local communities, ultimately engaging 720 women CCs (120 per district). In collaboration with the CBOs, the project implemented individual-, household-, community-, and institutional-level activities with the CCs to strengthen their leadership in creating resilient communities in flood-affected implementation districts.

Climate champion profiles

From March to August 2024, the project in Bangladesh administered a survey for the women CCs to capture basic demographic information and gauge their knowledge and attitudes about climate change, family planning, self-efficacy, and agency.⁸ Across the 5 implementation districts, 126 women CCs ages 14 to 47 responded to the survey. In February 2024, the project in Pakistan conducted a similar baseline survey, to which all 720 CCs responded. Results indicate that CCs in Bangladesh are younger, more educated, and more likely to be unmarried than the CCs in Pakistan (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

“

I learned to raise my voice and lead during disaster preparedness and response in my community because of this project.”

Taiba Akter

Volunteer, East Austogram Union, Austogram Upazila, Kishoreganj, Bangladesh

Figure 2. Age Distribution Among Women Climate Champions by Country

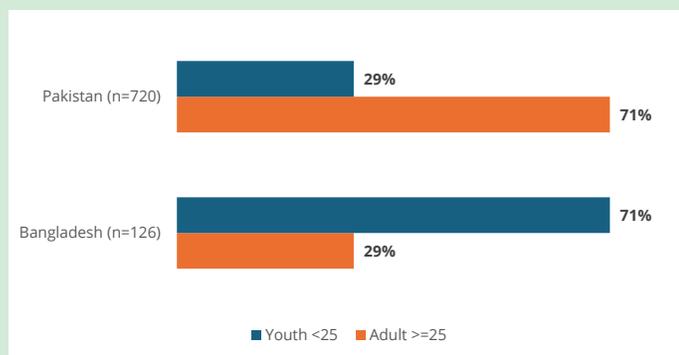
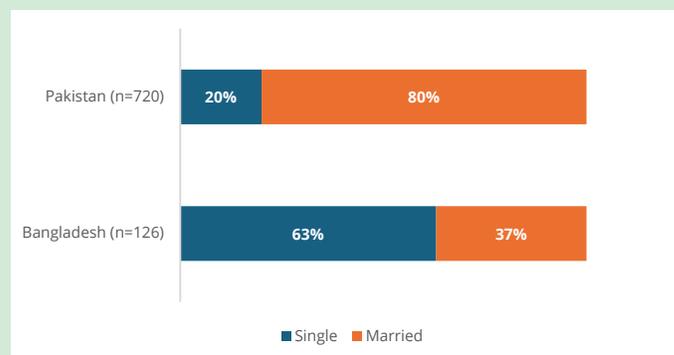
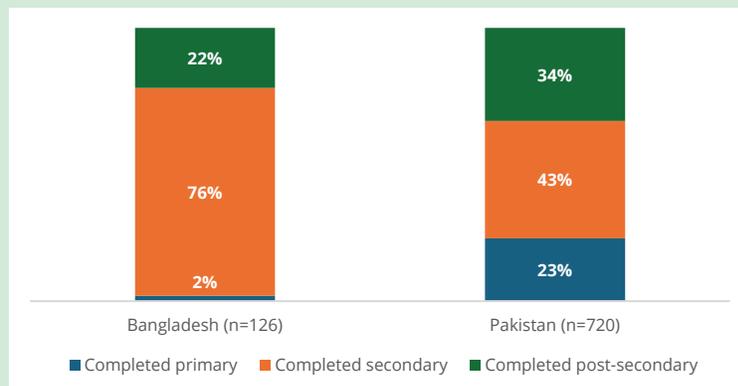


Figure 3. Marital Status Among Women Climate Champions by Country



All CCs in Pakistan were affected by the unprecedented 2022 floods. Among the 126 Bangladesh CC respondents, 77 (61%) had encountered a natural disaster in the last few years. Everyone who reported being affected by a natural disaster reported related financial losses. Only half (52%) reported recovering these losses. In 2022, the districts of Netrokona, Kishoreganj, Sunamganj, and Sylhet in Bangladesh all faced devastating floods. The disaster directly impacted 63% of the CCs from these locations. Of the 26 CCs in Cox's Bazar, 20 were affected by recent cyclones.

Figure 4. Educational Attainment Among Women Climate Champions by Country



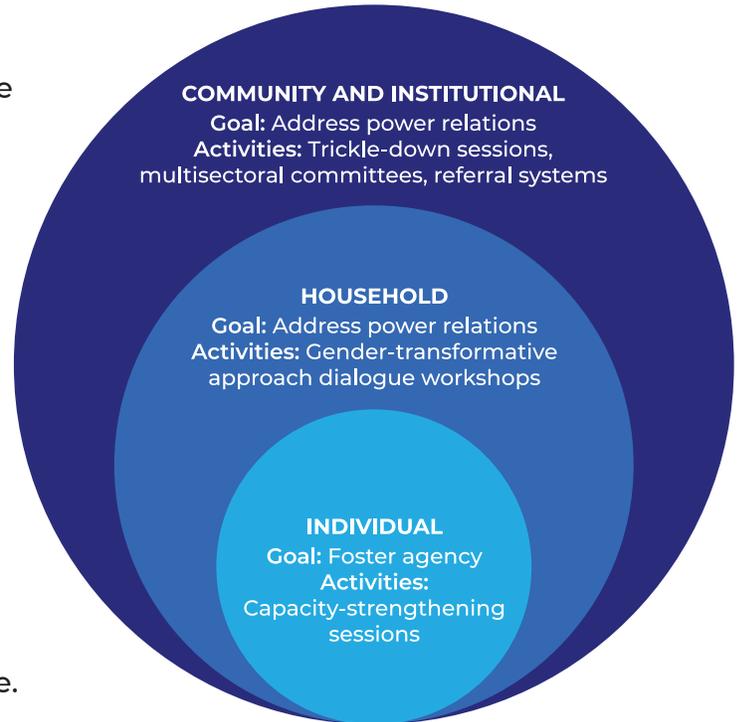
⁸ The project will share data on the impact of our program on CCs' knowledge and attitudes about climate change, family planning, self-efficacy, and agency in a separate publication once the endline data is available.

Key climate champion activities

The project supports CCs across multiple levels of the social-ecological model (Figure 4).

To foster agency at the individual level, CCs participate in interactive training sessions that strengthen climate- and health-related knowledge and skills. In June 2024, the project team in Pakistan conducted a 3-day master training of approximately 30 representatives from CBOs across the 6 implementation districts. These master trainers then trained CCs to deliver cascade trainings to community members. Training content included orientations to sexual and reproductive health and rights, disaster risk reduction, GBV, nutrition, and referral linkages. In Pakistan, the master trainers each conducted a training for approximately 25 CCs, reaching all 720 CCs in the country. In turn, the CCs conducted 1,800 community sessions of about 25 people per session, ultimately reaching 45,000 community members with vital climate and health knowledge.

Figure 5. Climate Champions in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Levels of Engagement, Mapped to the Socioecological Model

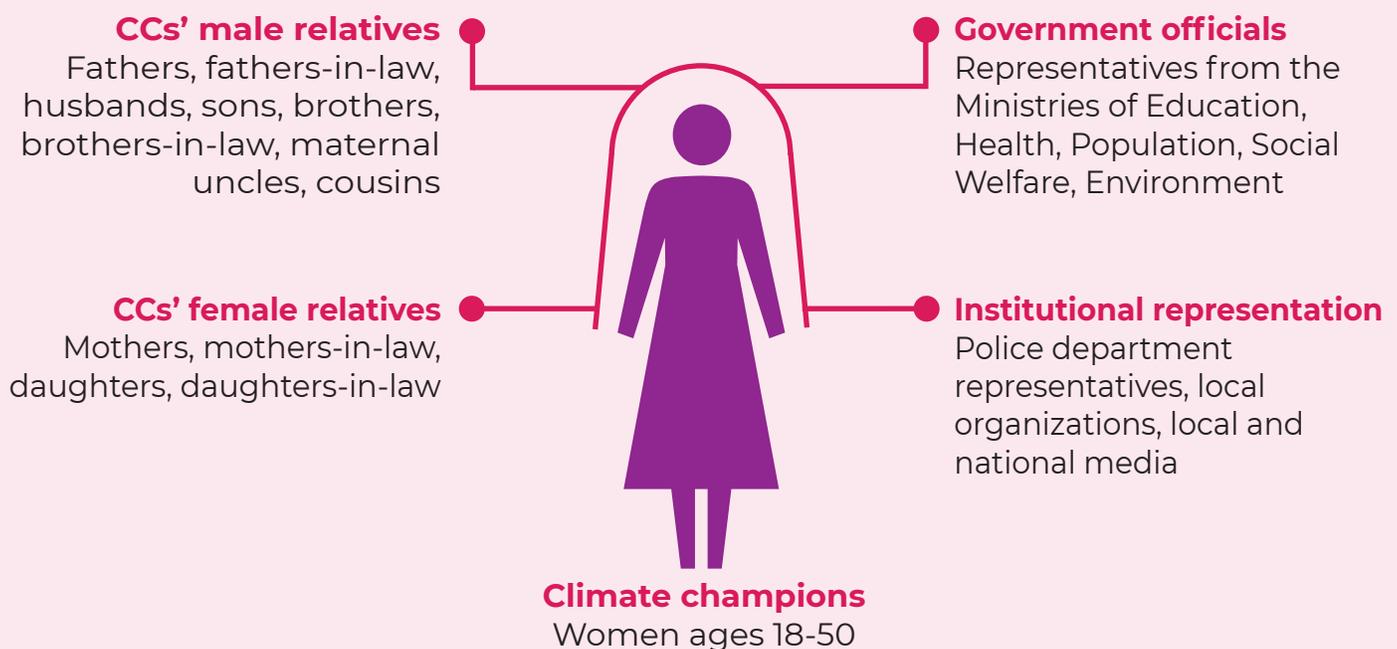


Climate champions engaged communities through community sessions, maintained strong coordination locally through regular union and upazila level coordination meetings, and led capacity-strengthening workshops, 2022-2025, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In Bangladesh, the project team used the same training curriculum used in Pakistan to train CCs, convening them in quarterly or bimonthly meetings to review their roles and provide refresher trainings over time. The project also collaborated with the fire service and civil defense department to prepare the CCs for gender-sensitive responses to diverse emergency scenarios, including fires, earthquakes, and floods, and training them in basic first aid. Once trained, the CCs created work plans in consultation with their project implementation officers and cascaded knowledge to their communities, holding 8,340 community awareness sessions from March 2023 to April 2025. These sessions resembled those CCs led in Pakistan.

To address power relations at the household level, the project in Pakistan facilitated gender-transformative approach (GTA) dialogue workshops for CCs and their allies and influencers (Figure 6). The project’s social development advisor and district coordinators facilitated 44 two-day workshops for 1,314 participants across the 6 implementation districts, creating a platform for CCs and their male allies to actively engage in examining, challenging, and transforming the root causes of women’s restriction or absence from leadership roles. GTA workshops are designed to address unequal gender and power relations and harmful gender norms, attitudes, behaviors, and practices that affect women’s leadership roles. The workshops explore gender roles and responsibilities, including gendered division of labor; GBV; and women’s participation in individual-, household-, and community-level decision making. Participants engaged in interactive power walks to understand power dynamics and in collaborative planning to promote women’s and girls’ leadership in building healthy, climate-resilient communities.

Figure 6: Gender-transformative approach Dialogue Workshop Participants (Pakistan Only)



To strengthen collaboration and coordination at the community and institutional levels, the CCs led several activities at both levels. In both countries, this included community knowledge-sharing sessions on climate and health. The CCs also strengthened community-based care and referral systems in both countries. In Pakistan, the project strengthened referral mechanisms and increased the number of referrals made by training Lady Health Supervisors to train Lady Health Workers (LHW) or CCs (in areas where LHWs do not operate) in implementation districts on the Department of Health-endorsed referral strategy and on distributing referral slips for reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health care. Through these initiatives, CCs distributed 12,236 referral slips to women in their communities. In Bangladesh, community-based care and referrals are processed

through the government's extensive community health networks. CCs bolstered these existing mechanisms by serving as additional resources in seasons prone to frequent natural disasters, complementing their broader scope of community engagement, risk assessment, and contingency planning.

The Project in Pakistan also created multisectoral committees (MSC) to ensure alignment of district-level initiatives with community needs and realities. MSCs are a critical linkage among CCs, district administrators from relevant ministries, international NGOs, CBOs, and the Women's Chamber of Commerce. At least two CCs represent their communities in regular MSC meetings, sharing health- and climate-related concerns directly with administrators for district-level planning. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the CCs collaborate with their communities' Disaster Management Committees by acting as first responders. CCs contribute to emergency response by providing early warnings in times of disaster. For example, on the eve of Cyclone Remal in May 2024, CCs in Cox's Bazar collaborated with local government and community leaders to warn people of the cyclone and help them reach designated shelters. In addition, 100 women CCs contacted women's groups by phone to provide critical information about accessing family planning, nutrition, and other health services during emergencies. The CCs also assist the government in conducting local advocacy for disaster response and supporting post-disaster efforts, such as distribution of relief supplies. Finally, they engage in school programming, including climate change mitigation and adaptation work.



“

...to minimize devastation in any disaster, the volunteers (CCs) played critical roles in last two years, as I have seen...they help building awareness, disseminating early warnings, supported greatly and saved life through relief activities and rebuilding communities.”

Md. Ruhul Amin
District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer (DRRO),
Netrokona, Bangladesh



Implementation lessons

Supporting CCs in Bangladesh and Pakistan through the project has yielded insights that can strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of similar programs in and beyond South Asia.

A comprehensive, long-term, multi-level capacity-strengthening strategy is required to effectively support CCs to serve their communities. Creation and application of government-owned, centrally developed, standardized, evidence-based guidelines, training materials, and job aids will help programs strengthen CCs' knowledge and skills and facilitate faithful application in other areas or by other partners. In future iterations of this or similar programs, each CC training session should provide a holistic, comprehensive view of the topic at hand. For example, a climate change session should cover the relationship between the causes and the increasing frequency and intensity of climate disasters. Gender discussions should focus on the contribution of women's decision-making abilities outside of the home to community members' abilities to grow, thrive, and support each other through disasters. Discussions about contraception should cover the range of options and their comparative benefits and limitations. Dialogues about male partners' attitudes on contraception should cover the role of partner support in improving health outcomes for women and their families. Information about accessible public and private health services should include guidance on accessing alternate facilities during disasters.

Linking volunteers with established government departments is necessary to ensure effective and sustainable preparation and response to disasters. The project experience demonstrates that when existing sub-district government departments are aware of the CCs, they



Climate champions training session, Compañiganj, Bangladesh. 2023.



communicate with them during disasters to solicit support for and participation in government preparedness and response efforts. These include communicating early warnings and information on available services, assisting disabled and pregnant women, and providing first aid. The CCs help ensure government agencies have essential information about vulnerable communities to be able to provide needed support during disasters. Close collaboration between CCs and local government entities enhances the government's ability to respond and increases CC accountability.

To sustain CC engagement beyond the life of the project, nurture the stakeholder network—especially the community-based partners—involved in project activities.

Volunteers frequently become inactive when supported programs end. But when partner NGOs and CBOs—often the ones to lead community-based programming and supervise volunteers—continue to function in the implementation location after project funding ends, they should continue to collaborate with the existing volunteer network to implement their activities. Moreover, maintaining active relationships with government and NGOs encourages ongoing community volunteer opportunities, notably in disaster preparedness and response efforts. Of note, the project-supported CCs in Bangladesh are now officially included as part of the Upazila disaster management and response team.



For lasting impact, invest in shifting gender norms toward equality.

In Bangladesh and Pakistan, women's engagement in income-generating activities and mobility outside the home is contingent upon the permission or agreement of family members. Reducing women's reliance on men enables them to meet their own needs and those of their children and families while men are away from home. Shifting community gender norms is a critical step in positioning women to lead social transformation. To volunteer and develop community resilience, women must be able to make decisions about activities outside of the house. Such projects should work to support women's decision-making capacity so they can lead their communities' disaster preparedness and response efforts. The GTA dialogue workshops in Pakistan helped emphasize to participants that men and boys play a critical role in creating an enabling environment for women's leadership.



Communicate clear evidence of the benefits to communities.

Facilitate community-level sessions and other opportunities to demonstrate the benefits of enhancing women's capacity to strengthen their families' and communities' resilience. Sessions can demonstrate how women's participation in social and economic sectors leads to community growth. For example, engaging in





Trickle down session, Pakistan, 2025.

income-generating activities, formal employment, or starting a small business—such as cultivating vegetables for commercial sale—are all viable options to provide women with more income to better support their families. Strengthening women’s professional skills also helps build confidence to volunteer and support their communities to prepare for disasters, assist other women in accessing health care, and ensure people know where to shelter during emergencies.



“

I attended the two-day Gender Transformative Approach training with my father, and it opened up conversations at home. We started discussing harmful gender norms, and even my brothers joined in. It gave me confidence and showed the men in my family how to become allies for change.”

Bibi Hajra
Charsadda, Pakistan



Mukta Rani, Bangladesh, 2025.

Mukta Rani: The “Resilience Didi” of Sunamganj, Bangladesh

College student Mukta Rani lives in Sunamganj, one of the most climate-vulnerable districts in Bangladesh. But to everyone there, she is known as “Resilience Didi,” because of her work as a climate champion with Pathfinder’s Women-led Climate Resilience program. From a young age, Mukta wanted to help those around her. In school, she joined the Scouts and became active in various volunteer efforts. Then, three years ago, Mukta heard that this project was recruiting CCs in her village. Thrilled, she immediately signed up, attended an orientation session, and received disaster safety and first aid training from the fire service department.

In bi-monthly volunteer meetings, Mukta and the other CCs identify local climate-related risks plan ways to reduce them, including collaborative action with local government and Pathfinder support and resources. Mukta has led environmental clean-up and tree-planting campaigns and helps organize community events to raise

awareness on health, hygiene, and climate issues, capitalizing on notable days like World Environment Day and National Disaster Preparedness Day. During the monsoon season, when floods are severe, Mukta regularly checks the weather updates and communicates early warnings and emergency messages to her community before, during, and after floods. She also helps people reach safe shelter when danger arises.

Mukta’s work may seem simple, but it has had a deep impact. People in her community are now more aware and better prepared for emergencies. They know how to store dry food, keep emergency contact numbers handy, and access the nearest shelter in times of crisis. Mukta plans to become a nurse—a goal that reflects her dedication to serving her community. She also hopes to inspire others in her village to take part in volunteer work, because—as she says, when a community acts together, it can face any challenge.

Gulshan Mirbehar: A Champion of Change in Pakistan

Ms. Gulshan Mirbehar from district Thatta, Sindh, is a CC and tireless advocate for women's rights. Since January 2024, Gulshan has been working with Pathfinder's women-led climate resilience project, bringing transformation to her rural community through leadership and service. Her passion for women's rights shines through her active participation in training on GTA, sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate change, disaster risk reduction, nutrition, and family planning (FP) organized by Pathfinder. Through the program, Gulshan learned to use visual storytelling techniques to document climate issues and community resilience efforts. Specifically, she captured the experiences of members of her community who had been affected by climate change. These stories and images were showcased in a district-level exhibition, allowing local authorities a powerful glimpse of the impact of climate change on women and girls. Gulshan has also participated in national seminars and trainings with the Chamber of Commerce-Karachi, further building her leadership profile.



Gulshan Mirbehar, Pakistan, 2025.

“

For me, it is important that my story, my voices are shared, and that empowers and supports my work as changing is difficult...and my community severely affected by floods every year. Hearing my story,... many may find inspiration, many will know its possible — and why not?”

Gulshan Mirbehar
Thatta, Sindh, Pakistan

Gulshan's impact is visible across her village. She ensures that pregnant women receive antenatal care and educates families on nutrition and FP through referral mechanisms. In March 2025, Gulshan led a Women's Assembly under the theme "For ALL Women and Girls: Rights, Equality, Empowerment", uniting more than 100 women and community leaders to advocate for gender equality and climate resilience. She also began to run an adult literacy and skill development center with the help of Pathfinder's local partner, where 29 women have enrolled in literacy programs and 25 in skills training to learn sewing, embroidery, jewelry making, and other crafts. These skills have helped the women earn income to support their families and even save money.

Now managing the center independently, Gulshan continues to mentor other rural women, creating ripples of change throughout her community. Ms. Gulshan Mirbehar stands as a symbol of strength, leadership, and hope—a true champion of change in rural Sindh.

Cover Photo: Ms. Khadija Akter, a community resilience volunteer, in a courtyard session with the women's group in Jalalabad Union, Sylhet Sadar sub-district in Bangladesh, 2024.

Photo strips: Various Project Activities, Pathfinder International Bangladesh and Pakistan.

About the Project

Pathfinder International, with generous support from the Takeda Pharmaceutical Company Limited Global CSR Program, is implementing Advancing the Leadership of Women and Girls Toward Better Health and Climate Change Resilience in Bangladesh and Pakistan from 2022 to 2025. The project strengthens health systems, enhances women's and young people's leadership, and improves community resilience to climate change. Toward that goal, the project promotes youth- and community-led actions for improving livelihood options, building resilient health systems, and managing health risks associated with climate change. This includes supporting access to sexual and reproductive health services; improving food and nutritional practices; ensuring access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities; and eliminating gender-based violence.

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