“When we need water, there is none,” says Maya Devi Sunar. “At other times, it comes and takes everything away.” Farmers like Sunar, who lives in rural Nepal, once drew from the knowledge of generations to eke a living out of the land, taking their cues from the steady rhythms of stars, migrations, nesting birds, and blossoming trees. But now nature has its signals crossed, and there’s no telling what or when it’s safe to sow, or whether any crop will survive the freakish weather in store for it.

For fishing families, the ocean—the lifeblood of their communities—has grown more perilous. Super typhoons are wreaking havoc on coastal villages, and rising sea levels threaten the very existence of these communities.

Helping struggling communities adapt to the changing climate is a top priority for Oxfam. So is ending gender inequality. In 2021, Oxfam and the organizations we partner with in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines introduced a program known as ACT (Asia Community Disaster Preparedness and Transformation) to help women take the lead in making their communities safer and their incomes more secure. In places where floods, droughts, and powerful storms pose a persistent and growing threat to lives and livelihoods, we’ve helped women introduce solutions: resilient crops and farming techniques, rigorous disaster preparedness measures, and projects to protect the environment. We’ve also helped them build bridges to their local governments to be sure women and other underrepresented groups have a say in planning and priorities.

WOMEN FIND THEIR VOICES

At the heart of each initiative is a women’s self-help group. Oxfam and local partners offered assistance establishing the groups and then provided trainings in everything from disaster preparedness to gender equality to working with local governments to technical and agricultural skills. Many of the women we work with explain that in the past they felt confined to their homes and had become frightened of speaking in public places.

WHERE CLIMATE CHANGE MEETS WOMEN’S RIGHTS

On the frontlines of the climate crisis, Oxfam sees advancing gender equality and reducing disaster risks as inextricably linked.
“Before I joined the women’s group,” says Andrellyn Fabillar, who lives in Eastern Samar, the Philippines, “I worked in the home and felt ashamed to talk to other people."

“It used to be that we couldn’t even speak outside our homes,” says Khima Tamata, who lives in the rural lowlands of Nepal.

The self-help groups changed all that. There, the women found their voices—and soon were using them on behalf of their communities. Now, they are passing on their learnings through trainings in disaster preparedness and are negotiating with local authorities for essential goods, services, and help with reducing disaster risks.

**REFORESTING THE OCEAN**

There is little standing between the town of Dolores in Eastern Samar, the Philippines, and the full force of the typhoons that sweep in from the Pacific—storms that are increasing in frequency and intensity. Two hundred meters [about one-eighth of a mile] from shore is a mangrove forest—a tangle of low trees that are perfectly adapted to salt water and tides—which helps buffer the community from destructive waves and winds. In 2021, Oxfam and partner SIKAT (the Center for the Development of Indigenous Science and Technology) encouraged women in a Dolores community to form savings groups and become active in disaster management, and we provided trainings to help them take their rightful places as decision makers in their community. With our support, the women undertook a project to protect and restore the mangroves; already, they have raised and planted thousands of saplings, enlisting their communities and local authorities to lend a hand.

And the groups are thriving.

“I used to stay at home, but now I go out with the other women and we laugh together,” says Purificicio Rosales. “I feel stronger.”

**ADAPTING TO FLOODS AND DROUGHT**

Oxfam and partners listen carefully to the community priorities and tailor our joint projects to the needs of each, supporting women’s groups to take the lead.

For example, in the village of Bena in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, Oxfam and partner Circle of Imagine Society Timor worked closely with women to set up a simple irrigation system to enable the community to grow vegetables in times of drought. But drought isn’t the only problem these farmers face: the river Noelmina is posing ever-growing threats to the community, so we also helped the women become experts at evaluating flood risks.

In Nepal, we’ve helped women introduce new cash crops that are adapted to the current conditions: sugarcane in one community and garlic in another. In a Dalit (lower-caste) community that had all but given up on growing crops, we installed five irrigation wells, and now it’s possible to earn a living there as a farmer.

**FACING DOWN TROUBLE, HAND IN HAND**

Communities confronting the mounting risk of catastrophic storms, floods, and droughts need all hands on deck. This means that helping women bring their minds and voices to bear on keeping their communities safe isn’t simply a good principle: lives may depend on it.

And there is more to the story. The lives of women living in poverty and facing the climate emergency are full of hardship, but those who have joined forces to protect their communities find this work has shifted their perspective and lifted their spirits.

They feel stronger, they say, and safer, and excited to be able to use their minds in new ways.

“We enjoy ourselves when we get together,” says Elena Anacio from the Philippines. Judging from the smiles and laughter around her, she seems to speak for everyone.