WOMEN WHO WOULD FIND A WAY

If everything stopped working tomorrow, who would you want in the room?

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15 women. 15 forms of practical intelligence for an uncertain future.

An original short documentary series concept + international character scouting project

paulawegier.com

THE QUESTION

We talk about resilience as if it were abstract.

- Somewhere, a woman is preserving 300 varieties of potato.
- Another is learning to read a changing ocean with her body.
- Another turned conversations in a tiny shop into a food network.
- Another helped make a medicine for one child.
- Another spent eighteen years building somewhere to grow old together.

What do these women know that the rest of us may need?

THE HYPOTHESIS

What if some of the skills we call “soft” are actually the hard infrastructure of whatever comes next?

CARING / LISTENING / ADAPTING / CONNECTING
NEGOTIATING / PRESERVING / SHARING / MAKING

This project looks for contemporary women who have already turned those abilities into something concrete: food, housing, scientific evidence, medicine, peace, safety, education, money, materials or collective action. They are not selected because they are “inspiring”. They are selected because they know how to do something the future may require.

THE ROOM

15 people you might want nearby when the default systems fail.

SURVIVE

ZARINA BEGUM

Bangladesh

PRESERVE

MARIA AVILA QUILCA

Peru

READ

KO MYEONG-HYO

South Korea

RECLAIM

CARMEN SILVA

Brazil

REIMAGINE

MARIA BRENTON + NEW GROUND

United Kingdom

CONNECT

JULIA VITARELLO

United States

INVENT

VALENTINA AGUDELO

Colombia

CHALLENGE

ARLENE BLUM

United States

REPAIR

ABIR HAJ IBRAHIM

Syria

NOTICE

YULY ROJAS

Peru

MOBILISE

SABRINA WALTER

South Africa

REDESIGN

EMMA GARATEA

Spain / Sweden

POOL

ROSE MOLOKOANE

South Africa

MULTIPLY

RANA DAJANI

Jordan

REMAKE

NZAMBI MATEE

Kenya

01 SURVIVE

ZARINA BEGUM

Bangladesh | farmer



Image: UNDP Bangladesh

THE WOMAN WHO SLEEPS IN A TREE

Every night after dusk, Zarina Begum climbs nearly 20 feet into a tree house she built with her own hands. Wild elephants cross her village in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, so staying on the ground can be dangerous. By day, the 61-year-old widow farms, raises goats and poultry, makes compost and sells produce from home because the market is hard to reach. Training and small cash support from a UNDP programme helped her turn years of fragile subsistence into a working system. Now neighbours come to learn from her, and she deliberately keeps traditional vegetable varieties alive. Her story is not about being prepared for everything. It is about learning quickly enough to keep adapting with what is available.

SURVIVE

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to make a life where life is not easy.

PROOF POINTS

- Tree house nearly 20 ft above ground
- Farms alone after 20+ years on the land
- Neighbours now seek her advice

ACCESS LEAD

UNDP Bangladesh / CALO programme

SOURCES

UNDP PROFILE ↗

02 PRESERVE

MARIA AVILA QUILCA

Peru | seed guardian



Image: AGROPIA / FAO

PRESERVE

THE WOMAN WITH 300 ANSWERS

High in the Peruvian Andes, Maria Avila Quilca safeguards more than 300 varieties of native potato. Red, yellow, purple, long, tiny: each one carries a different genetic answer to disease, frost, drought and changing weather. As a seed guardian within the AGROPIA cooperative, Maria combines ancestral selection practices with greenhouse reproduction of healthy seed material. The same potatoes that once struggled to command a fair local price now also reach international markets as chips, helping sustain farming families. For generations, women's work choosing seed and caring for soil was treated as background labour. Maria's field makes the opposite argument: when nobody can predict the conditions ahead, diversity itself becomes infrastructure.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to keep options alive.

PROOF POINTS

- Safeguards 300+ native potato varieties
- Produces healthy seed material for cooperative members
- Links ancestral knowledge with modern propagation

ACCESS LEAD

AGROPIA cooperative / Trias

SOURCES

FAO PROFILE ↗

TRIAS PROFILE ↗

03 READ

KO MYEONG-HYO

South Korea | haenyeo and citizen scientist



Image: Reuters

READ

THE WOMAN WHO FELT THE SEA CHANGE

Ko Myeong-hyo began diving off Jeju Island as a haenyeo, following a tradition carried through generations of women, including her mother. Then winter stopped feeling cold. At first she assumed her body had adapted. It had not: the sea itself was warming. Ko now dives with a camera and joins monthly coral monitoring with the Paran Ocean Citizen Science Center, recording damaged reefs, disappearing species and underwater waste. Her knowledge does not come only from instruments. It comes from years of entering the same water, noticing what feels different, and then documenting it. Before a graph announces that an ecosystem has changed, someone who lives inside it may already have felt the change on her skin.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to read a changing sea before the signal becomes obvious.

PROOF POINTS

- Third-generation Jeju haenyeo
- Monthly coral monitoring with Paran
- Documents sea change through underwater photography

ACCESS LEAD

Paran Ocean Citizen Science Center / Humans of Jeju

SOURCES

REUTERS REPORT ↗

HUMANS OF JEJU ↗

04 RECLAIM

CARMEN SILVA

Brazil | housing organiser



Image: MSTC / Carmen Silva

RECLAIM

THE WOMAN WHO SAW HOMES INSIDE EMPTY BUILDINGS

Carmen Silva arrived in Sao Paulo fleeing violence, lived in shelters and at one point slept on the street with her children. In the centre of one of the world's biggest cities she encountered an absurd equation: families without homes surrounded by empty buildings. She learned how to organise assemblies, negotiate, speak in housing councils and build trust among people with almost no individual leverage. Under her leadership, the Movimento Sem Teto do Centro has turned occupations such as 9 de Julho into places where housing, food, culture and political organisation coexist. Carmen did not study the city first and then decide to transform it. She had to survive the city, and from that position learned how to remake it collectively.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to turn strangers with little power into collective leverage.

PROOF POINTS

- Leads MSTC in central Sao Paulo
- 9 de Julho houses about 123 families
- Vacant buildings become housing plus community infrastructure

ACCESS LEAD

MSTC / Ocupacao 9 de Julho

SOURCES

UOL PROFILE ↗

ARCHDAILY 2026 ↗

05 REIMAGINE

MARIA BRENTON + NEW GROUND

United Kingdom | cohousing



Image: New Ground / Maria Brenton

THE WOMEN WHO REFUSED THE AVAILABLE ENDINGS

In 1998, six older women left a talk by Maria Brenton with a stubbornly simple idea: they did not want to grow old alone, and they did not want institutional care to be the default alternative. They wanted to live independently, together. Britain had almost no model for what they imagined. The group spent nearly two decades building both the community and the physical project, navigating land, finance, planning and group decisions before New Ground finally opened in London in 2016. Ten years later, 21 of the original 26 residents were still there. Their achievement is architectural, but the deeper invention is social: they designed in advance who might be on the other side of the door when they need one another.

REIMAGINE

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to design old age before old age designs it for you.

PROOF POINTS

- Idea began in 1998
- New Ground opened in 2016
- 21 of the original 26 residents remained in 2026

ACCESS LEAD

New Ground / Older Women's Cohousing

SOURCES

NEW GROUND HISTORY ↗

ABC 2026 INTERVIEW ↗

06 CONNECT

JULIA VITARELLO

United States | rare disease advocate

THE MOTHER WHO WOULD NOT ACCEPT THAT ONE CHILD WAS TOO FEW

Mila was six when she was diagnosed with a fatal genetic disease so rare that no existing treatment path fit her. Her mother, Julia Vitarello, began connecting scientists, donors and institutions that had never been assembled around one child before. She raised nearly $5 million from more than 6,000 supporters and worked with Timothy Yu's team at Boston Children's Hospital, which designed milasen, the first medicine created for a single person. Mila died in 2021, but Julia did not stop at the exception. She now works to make individualised medicines a repeatable route for other children. Sometimes the system has no door for the problem in front of you. Julia's skill is finding the people who can build one together.



Image: Mila's Miracle Foundation

CONNECT

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to make experts build something that did not exist.

PROOF POINTS

- Nearly $5M raised from 6,000+ supporters
- Milasen became the first medicine designed for one person
- Now building pathways to scale individualised medicines

ACCESS LEAD

Mila's Miracle Foundation

SOURCES

MILA'S MIRACLE FOUNDATION ↗

UK MHRA 2026 ↗

07 INVENT

VALENTINA AGUDELO

Colombia | health-tech founder

THE WOMAN WHO ASKED WHY THE MACHINE COULD NOT TRAVEL

In parts of Latin America, early breast-cancer screening is limited not because women do not care, but because the infrastructure is far away. Valentina Agudelo decided to reverse the direction of travel. She founded Salva Health and led the development of Julieta, a portable, non-invasive device that uses bioimpedance and computational analysis to flag breast tissue that may require further clinical investigation. The device has gained Colombian regulatory approval and moved into commercial use. Agudelo's invention is not a substitute for diagnosis; its ambition is to make triage more reachable. The question beneath it is larger than the product: why do we keep designing healthcare around where the machines are instead of where the people are?



Image: Salva Health / Valentina Agudelo

INVENT

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to redesign medicine around where people actually live.

PROOF POINTS

- Portable and non-invasive screening device
- Regulatory approval in Colombia
- Commercial launch followed field testing and partnerships

ACCESS LEAD

Salva Health

SOURCES

SALVA HEALTH ↗

PRINCESS OF GIRONA FOUNDATION ↗

08 CHALLENGE

ARLENE BLUM

United States | environmental health scientist

THE SCIENTIST WHO DISCOVERED THE SAME PROBLEM TWICE

In the 1970s, chemist Arlene Blum helped show that a flame retardant used in children's sleepwear posed serious health concerns. The chemical was removed. Decades later she discovered that related compounds had returned in furniture and baby products. Instead of treating the recurrence as a new isolated problem, Blum changed the strategy. She founded the Green Science Policy Institute and helped popularise a "Six Classes" approach: regulate harmful chemical families rather than chase one molecule at a time while industry substitutes another. Blum is also an accomplished mountaineer. The connection is useful: sometimes progress is not reaching a summit once. It is recognising the same mountain when it appears again under a different name.



Image: Arlene Blum / Wikimedia Commons

CHALLENGE

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to keep following evidence when the problem returns disguised.

PROOF POINTS

- Research helped remove tris from children's sleepwear
- Founded Green Science Policy Institute in 2008
- Advocates a class-based approach to harmful chemicals

ACCESS LEAD

Green Science Policy Institute

SOURCES

GSPI HISTORY ↗

ARLENE BLUM PROFILE ↗

09 REPAIR

ABIR HAJ IBRAHIM

Syria | peacebuilder

THE WOMAN WHO BUILDS BRIDGES WHERE BRIDGES BECAME DANGEROUS

Abir Haj Ibrahim began her career in Syria's oil sector. As the country fractured, she moved into a different kind of engineering: rebuilding the ability of people to work across conflict. She co-founded Mobaderoon, a civic network that grew to around 4,000 social activists, and led programmes that trained more than 300 community peacebuilders. The organisation works through dialogue, facilitation, civic education and local problem-solving, treating trust not as a feeling but as something that can be deliberately rebuilt. Roads, schools and homes can eventually be reconstructed with materials. Abir's work begins one layer earlier: with the social fabric that makes it possible for people to share those things again.



Image: USIP / Wikimedia Commons

REPAIR

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to rebuild trust after people have reasons not to trust.

PROOF POINTS

- Co-founded Mobaderoon
- Network described as around 4,000 social activists
- Peace Ambassador programme trained 300+ community peacebuilders

ACCESS LEAD

Mobaderoon Foundation

SOURCES

MOBADEROON PROFILE ↗

LSE SPEAKER PROFILE ↗

10 NOTICE

YULY ROJAS

Peru | community food organiser



Image: FAO / Yvan Ardiles

NOTICE

THE REVOLUTION THAT STARTED IN A TINY SHOP

During the pandemic, women came into Yuly Rojas's small shop in Manchay and began saying the same things in different ways: there was no work, food was running out, they did not know what to feed their children. Yuly did not have a foundation, a grant or a strategic plan. She had a shop, relationships and the ability to hear a pattern. Those conversations became collective kitchens and eventually part of REDOPA, the network of community kitchens in Pachacamac, which now participates in wider conversations about urban food policy. Leadership can look spectacular from the outside. Yuly's version begins with something almost invisible: recognising when enough private problems have accumulated to reveal a public one.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to notice a collective need before it has a name.

PROOF POINTS

- Organised through Manchay community kitchens
- Works through REDOPA in Pachacamac
- Community response now informs wider food-policy conversations

ACCESS LEAD

REDOPA / FAO Peru

SOURCES

FAO PROFILE ↗

11 MOBILISE

SABRINA WALTER

South Africa | activist and campaign designer



Image: Women For Change

MOBILISE

THE WOMAN WHO MADE A COUNTRY LIE DOWN

For years, Sabrina Walter and Women For Change documented women killed by gender-based violence in South Africa. In 2025 the organisation designed a protest that anyone could join: change your profile picture to purple, withdraw paid and unpaid labour and spending for a day, and at noon lie down for 15 minutes - one minute for each woman the campaign said was killed daily. The action landed immediately before the G20 summit. A petition passed one million signatures; public spaces and social feeds turned purple; and the government classified gender-based violence and femicide as a national disaster. Sabrina's insight was not simply how to make noise. It was how to design one precise gesture that millions of different people could perform together.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to make collective grief visible through one simple action.

PROOF POINTS

- G20 Women's Shutdown in November 2025
- Petition passed one million signatures
- GBVF classified as a national disaster

ACCESS LEAD

Women For Change

SOURCES

WOMEN FOR CHANGE TEAM ↗

UN SDG ACTION AWARDS 2026 ↗

12 REDESIGN

EMMA GARATEA

Spain / Sweden | industrial designer



Image: Cocoon

REDESIGN

THE MOTHER WHO STOPPED CYCLING

Emma Garatea was an industrial designer living in Sweden, where cycling was ordinary. Then she became a mother and stopped feeling that taking a toddler on a bike was ordinary at all. The child seat existed; the protection she wanted did not. Garatea founded Cocoon Airbag Protection to develop an inflatable safety system that can deploy around a child when crash-like motion is detected. The project is still moving toward market readiness, with patents, crash testing and engineering partnerships behind it. The product matters, but the character hook is simpler: thousands of parents had learned to absorb a fear as part of daily life. Emma treated that fear as a design brief instead.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to stop accepting an everyday risk just because it is normal.

PROOF POINTS

- Founded Cocoon after becoming a mother
- Patented inflatable child-seat protection system
- 2025-26 engineering work targets production readiness

ACCESS LEAD

Cocoon Airbag Protection

SOURCES

COCOON STORY ↗

FUTURE MOBILITY PROJECT ↗

13 POOL

ROSE MOLOKOANE

South Africa | grassroots urban organiser



Image: IISD/ENB - Mike Muzurakis

THE WOMAN WHO TURNED SMALL SAVINGS INTO URBAN POWER

Rose Molokoane's organising starts with amounts of money that look too small to matter. In Oukasie, an informal settlement outside Pretoria, she became part of a women-led savings culture in which households pool tiny contributions, document their own communities and use collective discipline to negotiate land, housing and services. Through FEDUP and Slum Dwellers International, that logic spread far beyond one settlement. UN-Habitat says FEDUP has helped more than 150,000 informal-settlement residents - most of them women - pool savings. The money matters, but not only as capital. Saving together creates records, meetings, trust and a constituency. Rose's real invention is showing how small resources can become a political technology when they are held collectively.

POOL

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to turn tiny individual resources into collective bargaining power.

PROOF POINTS

- Resident of Oukasie savings scheme
- FEDUP helped 150,000+ residents pool savings
- Model links savings to land, housing and service negotiations

ACCESS LEAD

FEDUP / Slum Dwellers International

SOURCES

UN-HABITAT PROFILE ↗

PENN IUR PROFILE ↗

14 MULTIPLY

RANA DAJANI

Jordan | scientist and social innovator



Image: Wikimedia Commons

MULTIPLY

THE WOMAN WHO DESIGNED AN IDEA TO TRAVEL WITHOUT HER

When Rana Dajani returned to Jordan after years abroad, she noticed that many children read for school but rarely for pleasure. Her response was deliberately small: gather children in a familiar neighbourhood space and have a local adult read aloud. No expensive building, no specialist librarian, no dependency on Rana herself. We Love Reading turned that simplicity into its operating system. It trains local ambassadors who create their own reading circles and community libraries. By 2026, the model was active in more than 71 countries with over 4,400 community libraries. Rana's strength is not merely starting something useful. It is stripping an idea down until other people can own it, adapt it and reproduce it without asking permission.

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to make an idea spread without needing to control it.

PROOF POINTS

- Founded We Love Reading in Amman
- Active in 71+ countries
- 4,400+ community libraries reported in 2026

ACCESS LEAD

We Love Reading / Taghyeer

SOURCES

WE LOVE READING STORY ↗

UNESCO LITBASE ↗

15 REMAKE

NZAMBI MATEE

Kenya | materials engineer and founder



Image: Gjenge Makers

THE WOMAN WHO RAN OUT OF BUYERS FOR HER WASTE

Nzambi Matee did not initially plan to manufacture building products. Gjenge Makers began as a plastic collection business, sorting waste to sell on to recyclers. Then a practical problem appeared: the team was collecting plastic faster than existing recyclers could absorb it. Instead of slowing down, Matee changed the question. Using her materials background and self-taught hardware skills, she helped develop machinery and a process that mixes recycled plastic with sand to make paving products. Waste stopped being something she needed another company to buy; it became feedstock for something people already needed. The move is characteristic of the whole project: when the system presents a bottleneck, redesign the system rather than wait for permission to continue.

REMAKE

WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

How to look at a bottleneck and turn it into a new resource stream.

PROOF POINTS

- Gjenge began as a plastic collection idea
- Pivoted when recyclers could not absorb the volume
- Now manufactures recycled-plastic paving products

ACCESS LEAD

Gjenge Makers

SOURCES

GJENGE MAKERS ↗

UNEP PROFILE ↗

THE COLLECTIVE PICTURE

None of them knows how to do everything. Together, they know quite a lot.

SURVIVE	PRESERVE	READ
RECLAIM	REIMAGINE	CONNECT
INVENT	CHALLENGE	REPAIR
NOTICE	MOBILISE	REDESIGN
POOL	MULTIPLY	REMAKE

WHAT THEY HAVE IN COMMON

01	NOTICE	They notice what is not working before it becomes an official problem.
02	WORK WITH WHAT EXISTS	They start with available people, materials, knowledge and relationships.
03	CONNECT	They join resources that were previously separated.
04	PRESERVE	They keep knowledge and options alive instead of assuming novelty is always better.
05	STRETCH RESOURCES	They make small amounts of money, time, food or attention travel further.
06	PERSUADE	They get other people to participate, contribute, trust, fund or change.
07	LEAVE CAPACITY BEHIND	Their strongest systems can continue after they step away.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

A development sample for a character-led international documentary series.

CHARACTER DISCOVERY

International research across grassroots movements, science, design, health, food systems, housing, education, peacebuilding and informal economies.

SELECTION

Characters chosen for demonstrated agency, narrative potential, specificity of knowledge and contrast with the rest of the cast.

VERIFICATION

Each profile checked against primary, institutional or high-quality reporting sources. Claims were reduced where evidence was weaker.

STORY DEVELOPMENT

Research reframed into scene, conflict, action, consequence and the transferable intelligence each person embodies.

ACCESS

Each character includes an organisational access lead for future interview, film or commissioning work.

SOURCES / 01-08

01 ZARINA BEGUM

- UNDP profile ↗

02 MARIA AVILA QUILCA

- FAO profile ↗
- Trias profile ↗

03 KO MYEONG-HYO

- Reuters report ↗
- Humans of Jeju ↗

04 CARMEN SILVA

- UOL profile ↗
- ArchDaily 2026 ↗

05 MARIA BRENTON + NEW GROUND

- New Ground history ↗
- ABC 2026 interview ↗

06 JULIA VITARELLO

- Mila's Miracle Foundation ↗
- UK MHRA 2026 ↗

07 VALENTINA AGUDELO

- Salva Health ↗
- Princess of Girona Foundation ↗

08 ARLENE BLUM

- GSPI history ↗
- Arlene Blum profile ↗

SOURCES / 09-15

09 ABIR HAJ IBRAHIM

- Mobaderoon profile ↗
- LSE speaker profile ↗

10 YULY ROJAS

- FAO profile ↗

11 SABRINA WALTER

- Women For Change team ↗
- UN SDG Action Awards 2026 ↗

12 EMMA GARATEA

- Cocoon story ↗
- Future Mobility project ↗

13 ROSE MOLOKOANE

- UN-Habitat profile ↗
- Penn IUR profile ↗

14 RANA DAJANI

- We Love Reading story ↗
- UNESCO LitBase ↗

15 NZAMBI MATEE

- Gjenge Makers ↗
- UNEP profile ↗

SERIES DEVELOPMENT

A visual, character-led format built to travel.

POTENTIAL FORMAT / 15 × 8–12 MIN SHORT FILMS

FORM	One woman. One practical intelligence. One world made visible through action.
TONE	Observational, intimate, contemporary — never “inspirational profile” television.
VISUAL ENGINE	Hands, tools, landscapes, rooms, rituals and systems: show the knowledge before explaining it.
DEVELOPMENT	International character scouting · verification · narrative framing · access routes.

Research + series development: Paula Wegier

IF EVERYTHING STOPPED WORKING TOMORROW,

who would you want in the room?

Perhaps we should start paying more attention to the people who already know how to find a way.