

## Parsons School of Design's GEMS Program Creates a Climate Action Campaign for the United Nations

October 2020



This year, the Parsons Global Executive Master of Science in Strategic Design and Management (GEMS) program engaged in a strategic design project with the United Nations. In March 2020, the GEMS cohort was first presented with a design challenge: to support the UN's Global Communications group in promoting the Decade of Action. The Decade of Action is a campaign to deliver the Sustainable

Development Goals by 2030 by mobilizing more governments, civil society, and businesses and calling on all people to make the Global Goals their own. Participants were divided into three teams, each of which focused on a problem in need of sustainable solutions: [climate change](#), [gender equality](#), and [poverty](#).

The GEMS program is a Master of Science degree in Strategic Design and Management offered at The New School's Parsons School of Design. Only a few leaders, from a wide range of industries and global locations, are chosen each year to participate. In the program, strategic design is used to develop transformative, and often disruptive, solutions for business, nonprofits, and societal needs.

The project was briefly thrown into a tailspin with the onset of the coronavirus lockdown in mid-March. Because of the restrictions, the team could not meet in person, which created a need to modify expectations and ways of working — immediately. All work was conducted remotely using virtual collaborative tools. Cross-global teams and a new process for the overall project were developed. Compounding the difficulty of an already challenging task, the climate action and gender equality teams were combined and asked to find one design solution to address both issues. This initially seemed impossible, but the program teaches that solutions can always be found through ingenuity and collaboration.

The GEMS team members come from a range of cultural and professional backgrounds, including music, retail, hospitality, talent acquisition, the military, and art. This may seem like an unlikely group to address societal sustainability goals; however, in the strategic design process, we also find that it is exactly such diversity in thought and experience that can bring about innovative ideas.

Guiding the team along their journey was Parsons faculty member Rinat Sherzer. She explains, “This was such an incredible opportunity, to guide GEMS students in the process of working with the UN on their sustainable goals. Working directly with the UN has given us the monumental opportunity to create a solution that can truly reach and impact millions of lives. Tackling wicked problems such as climate change and gender equality (and especially the intersection of the two) requires flexible and creative thinking and the ability to deeply understand the ecosystems of the issues at hand. A major element that worked in our favor was the diversity of the group; having talents from the corporate, art, design, and nonprofit worlds allowed the students to bring in new perspectives backed up by unique skills. In the overall project, we used effective navigation tools and guiding principles rooted in empathy, befriending the unknown, and seeing the unseen. If I could sum up the success ingredients of this project, they would be a skillful team, a noble purpose, creative thinking, humility, and a powerful partner.”

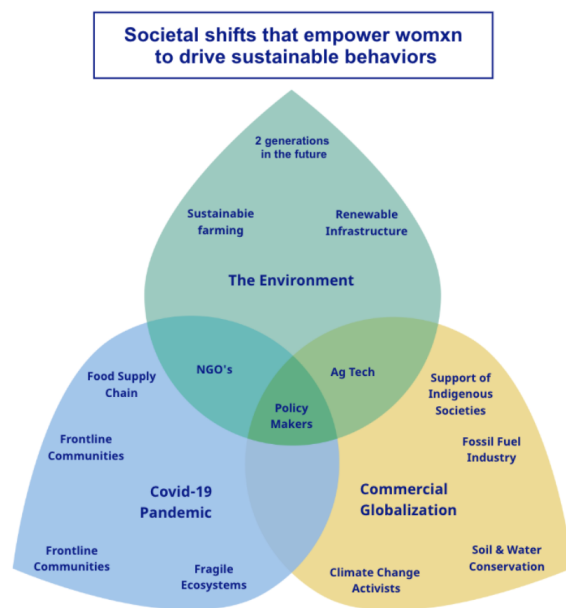
In the strategic design process, a collaborative, iterative methodology is used to assess the problem and develop solutions. According to Melissa Rancourt, academic director of the GEMS program, “Each design challenge will need a custom approach in order to arrive at the right solution. The GEMS program embeds several design challenges throughout the entire program, and every cohort of students has the opportunity to put their skills to work with an organization-led challenge such as this one. This particular design challenge is massive, incredible to undertake, and important to achieve. It has been simply awe-inspiring to witness the approach of our GEMS-and-UN collaborative team in their efforts to tackle these themes.”

## Focusing on Climate Change and Gender Equality

The GEMS team tasked with looking at both climate change and gender equality set to work. During an initial ideation phase, the team maintained a focus on human-centered experiences and solutions that resonate across cultures, generations, and socioeconomic levels. The initial step was to construct stakeholder maps for both climate change and gender equality and to find points of overlap and levers that could be used to effect change in both areas.

In the research phase, team members decided to virtually canvas the globe to uncover needs and challenges in five areas: NGOs and policy, gender equality in agriculture, womxn in sustainability, diet and farming, and countering arguments from climate change deniers. Data analysis confirmed the assumption that agriculture allows womxn to effect change on a large scale.

The team interviewed a diverse group of people with deep knowledge about sustainability in food and agriculture, food scarcity, climate, and womxn in farming. Their research involved examining 84 texts and articles and conducting 12 hours of interviews with relevant experts across five continents. After comparing solutions driven by both values and data, the team came to a pivotal realization: Climate change is viewed as a womxn’s issue. This recognition shaped the question that underpinned the entire project: **How might we spark sustainable behaviors by empowering womxn in their communities?**

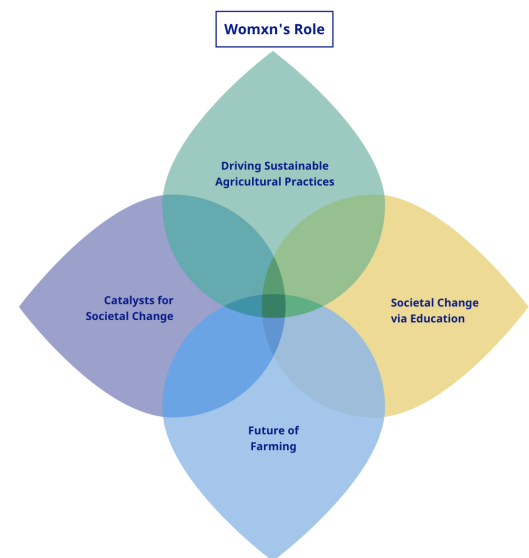


By the week of the presentation, the team had assembled mountains of data, but no single solution addressing both climate change and gender equality had emerged. Time was short and stress levels were high. Sherzer spoke with the team

and encouraged them by pointing out that the biggest breakthroughs often happen in the realm of the unknown and uncertainty, when a group has concluded its research and still seems to be floundering. She encouraged the team to pause for a moment and then keep reviewing ideas with fresh eyes to find the right solution.

The team's insights centered on three key themes:

1. Womxn's empowerment can lead to more environmentally friendly decision making at the household and national levels.
2. Cultural connection is a vital means of building trust and ensuring a community's adoption and implementation of climate-addressing practices.
3. Moral values centered on compassion and fairness predict people's willingness to make sustained lifestyle changes to avert climate change.



**A pivotal finding in framing the solution was that lasting societal change can result when children influence their parents.** While parents regularly teach kids about their immediate world, larger and more difficult topics like climate change are not often meaningfully addressed. When the presentation of new information to children is coupled with hands-on learning, the children feel empowered to ask questions and adopt behaviors that connect them to their friends, school and community. **The educational part stood out as a role the UN could play in helping parents and children connect on promoting climate action and gender equality.**

### **Solution Found!**

The team's campaign ideas centered on children and their role in sparking climate action. **Focusing on children allows a clean slate in relation to gender equality and so by exploring the role of children, the team expanded their focus from**

**gender equality to human equality.** It is children’s voice within the family and community and their views as they age that will lead to the adoption of climate-sustaining practices and the attainment of gender equality. The team designed solutions aimed at driving both children and their parents to act.

The team developed a campaign idea called “Climate Superhero” and presented an initial prototype geared to children consisting of a single worksheet. The worksheet included ideas for a group of superheroes with the power to help solve the problem of climate change; children were free to create their own if they wished. After selecting or drawing their superheroes, the children were to take a simple action to help protect the climate. Parents were asked to post their children’s work to social media.

Feedback on initial prototypes revealed that the worksheet was an effective tool for sparking conversation on climate change between parents and their children. One parent remarked that she encouraged her child to recycle and take other climate-preserving actions at home but stated, “I don’t know that I’ve ever had a conversation with her about why climate action is important.” With initial feedback received, the team conducted another lightning round of prototyping, then set about making the final assets for presentation to the UN.



Team member Emily Arlington set about creating the final assets for the campaign. She took the superheroes created for the prototypes, originally only described in text, and transformed them into non-gendered and ethnically neutral figures whom any child could envision themselves as. Arlington created a complete package including a mock homepage, chat stickers, an enhanced worksheet, and everything else needed for the UN team to see how the design might be used. The rest of the team devised the campaign mechanics, including metrics for success, and outlined them, so that the UN could implement the campaign with minimal effort.

Arlington said, “This project allowed me to use my strategic design experience to bring a positive new look to climate action. It has been a dream of mine to illustrate content that teaches and empowers kids to be better global citizens, and I am very grateful to the United Nations for this opportunity.”

At one point during the final presentation to the UN, Martina Donlon, acting chief of the Sustainable Development Section of the Department of Global Communications for the UN, could be seen calling someone off camera over to the screen and chatting briefly with her while pointing at the screen. The team later learned that she was calling her 11-year-old daughter over to get immediate feedback. Her daughter loved the characters and the inclusion of digital chat stickers.

The campaign would go on to become the children’s component of [Act Now](#), the UN’s campaign for individual action for climate change and sustainability, which launched in October 2020, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. The team created an immersive webpage for the [“Climate Superhero”](#) campaign, with animations and facts on all the climate superheroes and downloadable content animated by Arlington. The heroes also tied in to the Act Now daily actions recommended by the UN. In addition, a social media campaign was initiated to promote the heroes.



“The GEMS team came up with a beautifully designed campaign for kids, allowing us to take elements of the Act Now campaign and specifically target the crucial youth segment in a fun, engaging, and empowering way,” said Donlon. “We are very excited to have the Climate Action Superheroes mobilizing kids and parents around the world to take action on climate change and sustainability.” Donlon concludes.

The entire project took just eight weeks from inception to final presentation to the UN. This was the first time the GEMS cohort were able to put their coursework into practice with a client, and the outcome was far beyond their expectations. The team used their diversity as an asset and relied on strategic design and design thinking principles to take what seemed like an impossible challenge and turn it into an extraordinary success.



## GEMS Team

**Sam Kaestner** is a professional clarinetist, active-duty soldier in the U.S. Army, and experienced marketer. He has been a member of the prestigious West Point Band for more than 18 years and has three children. Connect to him [here](#).

**Emily Arlington** is a multidisciplinary designer who began her career in the fashion industry. Her passion for advocacy prompted her move into design strategy as a career. Arlington currently has her own consultancy business focused on sustainable, human-centered projects. Connect to her [here](#).

**Uriah Pamintunan** is based out of Orange County, California, and is a talent acquisition manager at Slalom Consulting. Connect to her [here](#).

**Janine Beydoun** is an experienced hospitality leader who is passionate about food, climate change, technology, and customer experiences. Before working on her MS at Parsons School of Design, Janine received her bachelor's degree from Cornell University's Hotel School. Connect to her [here](#).

**Erin Dorman** is a leader in the global fashion and luxury retail industry. She is passionate about connecting with people, building community, and seeing process, products, and societal wellness through a human-centered lens. Connect to her [here](#).

**Eugene Lumpkin** is a chief designer and entrepreneur with extensive international experience in fashion. He owns a firm in Belgium that develops new concepts for apparel and lifestyle brands. Lumpkin is a creative and strategic thinker with a focus on sustainability and technology. Connect to him [here](#).

**Mark Menke** is a senior marketing leader at LinkedIn in the San Francisco Bay Area. He leads an executive community of talent and HR leaders that blends thought leadership, innovation, and experiences. He's passionate about the intersection of community, design, innovation, diversity, inclusion, and creativity. Connect to him [here](#).



**Alejandra Galindo** is an experienced strategic design consultant who uses a human-centered design approach to translate human needs into business insights that support cultural and operational changes within organizations. She is currently developing hands-on educational activities to help children build their creative confidence. Connect to her [here](#).

**Iliana Alexandrova** is an innovative multidisciplinary design strategist with a focus on strategic design, UX, UI and IA. She is currently a senior UX designer at McKinsey & Company. Alexandrova is passionate about fine art and about social change through design. On any given weekend, she can be found plein air painting. Connect to her [here](#).

**Faculty member Rinat Sherzer** is a New York-based interdisciplinary ethical designer, biotech engineer, and social entrepreneur tackling complex issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion. She is the founder of [Of Course Global](#), a social innovation consultancy working with Fortune 500 companies, and an adjunct professor at Parsons. Connect to her [here](#).

**GEMS Academic director Melissa Rancourt** is an educator, engineer, and entrepreneur with more than 25 years of experience in creatively and efficiently disrupting the status quo. Connect to her [here](#).

### **UN Team**

**Martina Donlon** is the acting chief of the Sustainable Development Section in the UN Department of Global Communications. She promotes action on the Sustainable Development Goals and climate change.

**David McCreery** develops external partnerships for the Strategic Communications Division of the UN Department of Global Communications.



For more about the Global Executive Master of Science degree in Strategic Design and Management at The New School's Parsons School of Design, visit [newschool.edu/DesignGoesGlobal](https://newschool.edu/DesignGoesGlobal).

For inquiries about the degree, email [global@newschool.edu](mailto:global@newschool.edu).