

OVERVIEW

# FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE

## A Framework for Action



As the world nears irreversible climate tipping points, women, girls and gender-diverse people are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. Despite powerful calls from the United Nations Secretary-General to end the “suicidal war against nature”, policy action is falling woefully short of what is needed to prevent and adapt to climate change.

In *Feminist Climate Justice: A Framework for Action*, UN-Women provides an overarching vision and practical guidance on what policymakers need to do to ensure countries transition to low-emission economies while building women’s resilience and enabling them to seize new opportunities, recognizing their leadership and agency in driving change.

The framework includes a focus on the global food system, a major contributor to the climate crisis that undermines gender equality, to illustrate how feminist climate justice can be applied; and an analysis of the major barriers to accountability for gender-responsive climate action and how they can be overcome.

In launching this paper, which informs the conceptual framework for the forthcoming *Progress of the World’s Women* flagship report (expected in 2025), the authors aim to generate debate and open up space for discussion of feminist alternatives to the status quo.

## WHY FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Gender inequalities intensify vulnerability to climate change impacts, which in turn jeopardize hard-won gains on women's rights

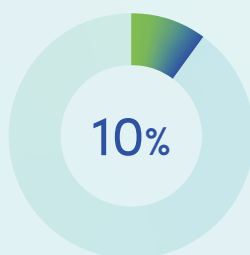
Without bold action, the world is headed for

**3°C** of global heating

by the end of this century and an increasingly unliveable planet.<sup>a</sup>

In the past  
**20** years

the number of climate-related disasters has **nearly doubled**.<sup>b</sup>



Today, 10 per cent of women live in **extreme poverty**.<sup>c</sup>

By 2050, under a worst-case climate scenario, up to

**158.3**  
million more women and girls may be pushed into poverty globally.<sup>c</sup>

Gender-based violence increases in times of crisis, and the climate crisis is no different.<sup>a</sup> For example,

The 2022 drought in the Horn of Africa resulted in a nearly fourfold **increase in child marriage** in affected areas of Ethiopia.<sup>d</sup>



In Somalia, episodes of **intimate partner violence and rape** increased by 20 per cent.<sup>d</sup>



Climate change is exacerbating water scarcity, which **increases the burden of water collection and treatment** on women and girls.<sup>c</sup>



Globally, every day, women spend

**2.8**  
more hours than men on unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>c</sup>



Feminist climate justice aims for a world where women, girls and gender-diverse people can flourish on a healthy and sustainable planet.

# GENDER INEQUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE: UNDERSTANDING THE LINKAGES

**Gender inequalities intensify vulnerability to climate change impacts**, and the failure to take gender into account in climate policy exacerbates the problem.

For example:

- Women, girls and gender-diverse people are often at greater risk of harm during disasters, including because their limited access to technology and literacy can create barriers to receiving timely information.
- Women's unequal access to economic resources means that when weather patterns change, disrupting infrastructure and public services, they are less able to adapt their livelihoods, recover and rebuild.
- Women often have greater unpaid care responsibilities in families and communities in the context of environmental change and stress, climate-related disasters, as water, fuel and nutritious food are harder to come by and the health-care needs of family members increase.
- Emerging evidence shows that the changing climate is driving increased levels of violence and discrimination against women and girls. In drought-prone areas, girls are more likely to drop out of school.

Progress on gender equality since the commitments of the Beijing Platform for Action has been slow and incremental. Without action to halt climate change, the world's women and girls face a wholesale reversal of their human rights.

**The climate crisis intersects with a series of other crises**, each of which is exacerbated by a heating planet, to create a polycrisis that includes:

- a crisis of extreme economic inequalities, where wealth and power are concentrated among the few while there is widespread economic insecurity among the many, trapping millions of women and girls in poverty and hunger;
- a crisis of care, exacerbated by a vicious cycle of debt, austerity and the retrenchment of public services, which has left millions of children and care-dependent adults without support while imposing hard choices and enormous costs on women and girls;
- a crisis of racist violence and dispossession, rooted in attempts to dehumanize and disenfranchise Black, Indigenous and other people of colour, including migrants and refugees;
- a crisis of democracy, which is hampering action on climate change, fuelled by the rise of movements that propagate xenophobic, regressive nationalism and climate denialism, often alongside anti-immigrant and anti-gender rhetoric; and
- an upsurge in violence and protracted conflict, resulting in forced migration and conflict-related sexual violence, which is also leading to increased fragmentation and geopolitical gridlock in multilateral institutions.

## FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE

**The vision for feminist climate justice** is of a world in which everyone can enjoy the full range of human rights, free from discrimination, and flourish on a planet that is healthy and sustainable.

To achieve this, economic and social policies need to be substantially transformed away from the pursuit of growth at any cost and profits for the few. Instead of expecting individuals to absorb and bounce back from

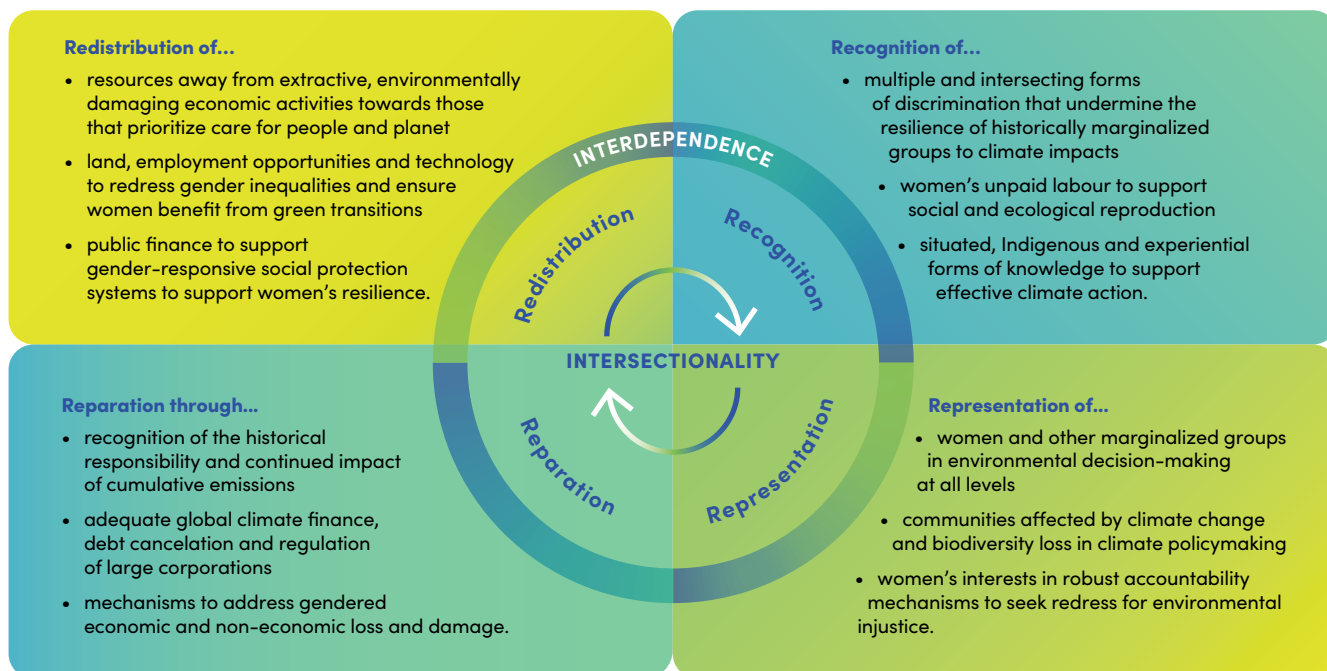
ever more extreme conditions and inequalities, feminist climate justice recognizes that resilience can only be achieved through relationships that are based on equal rights and respect.

Therefore, care is at the forefront of feminist climate justice, and the urgent question is: how can societies collectively organize care for people and the planet to ensure the "survival and flourishing of life"?

**To move towards feminist climate justice, and to ensure that climate policies respond to the rights of women, girls and gender-diverse people, action is needed across four key dimensions:**

1. **Recognition** of women's rights, labour and knowledge
  - Policies need to prioritize the rights of women and other groups that face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that undermine their resilience to climate impacts.
  - Alongside scientific knowledge, policies need to take into account the knowledge and expertise of women, including Indigenous, rural and young women, to support effective climate action.
2. **Redistribution** of resources away from fossil fuel-dependent economies towards those that prioritize human and planetary well-being
  - Women's access to employment opportunities, land, education and technology is crucial, so that they can benefit from green transitions.
  - Public finance is essential to support gender-responsive social protection systems that enhance women's resilience.
3. **Representation** and meaningful participation of women and other marginalized groups in climate-related decision-making at all levels
  - Communities affected by climate change and biodiversity loss, including women's organizations, need to be at the table to influence policymaking.
  - Accountability for environmental injustice and protection of women human rights defenders is critical.
4. **Reparations** that recognize that the Global North bears the largest share of responsibility for historical and continued emissions, repair harms done and ensure they are not repeated
  - Alongside debt cancellation, countries in the Global North need to meet their commitments to climate finance and ensure that it goes to the most vulnerable countries and the grassroots women's organizations on the frontline of climate change.
  - The loss and damage fund needs to be generously funded and set up to address both economic and non-economic loss and damage, such as increased levels of gender-based violence or unpaid care work.

## Dimensions and principles of feminist climate justice



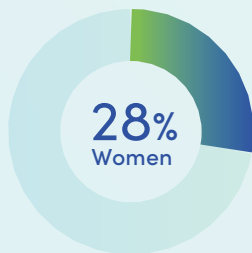
## THE GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM, CLIMATE CHANGE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

The global food system is broken. It is fuelling climate change, failing to feed the world's population and exacerbating inequalities. It is one major sector that needs to be transformed to advance feminist climate justice.

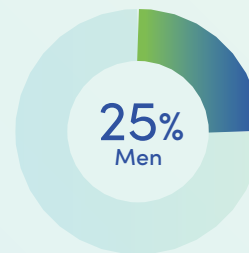
Globally, **one third of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions** come from agrifood systems,



an increase of **9 per cent** since 2000.<sup>a</sup>



In 2022, 28 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men **experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.**<sup>b</sup>



By 2050, under a worst-case climate scenario, an additional

# 236

million women and girls could be pushed into food insecurity.<sup>b</sup>

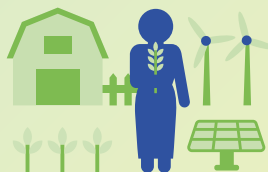
Small-scale farmers, the majority of whom are women, **produce one third of the world's food.**<sup>c</sup> Yet, their adoption of climate-resilient agriculture is held back by lack of finance and insecure land rights.



Women are less likely than men to own agricultural land in

# 40 OUT OF 46

countries with available data.<sup>b</sup>



**Policies should support small-scale women farmers to adopt climate resilient agriculture, scale up social protection systems to protect against rising food insecurity and cancel debt so that countries can invest in sustainable food production.**

# OPERATIONALIZING FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE TO FIX GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM

The **global food system** is used as an example of a sector that needs to be transformed to show how UN-Women's feminist climate justice framework can be applied in practice. Applying the framework to the food and agriculture sector would mean ensuring:

1. **Recognition** of women's rights, labour and diverse knowledge in agriculture, food production and nutrition, with benefits for both gender equality and environmental sustainability
  - Effective climate adaptation and mitigation in the agrifood sector requires approaches that are based on the bottom-up, context-specific knowledge and expertise of small-scale farmers. For example, women farmers have formed cooperatives to scale up agroecology, a form of food production that is climate resilient and values ecosystems services, fixes carbon and protects biodiversity.
2. **Redistribution** of public resources to invest in social protection systems to ensure food security and build women's resilience in the context of climate change
  - Such systems can protect against the impacts of extreme weather shocks and slow-onset events. They can also contribute to gender-just transitions within food systems. For example, school feeding programmes reach about half of all children globally and are increasingly sourcing nutritious food from small-scale women farmers.
3. **Representation** of women and gender-diverse people in decision-making on climate and food systems, from the local to the global level
  - Feminists have been active within social movements to bring people together to raise consciousness and develop platforms for change. For example, La Via Campesina, which represents poor peasants, small and medium-size farmers and landless rural labourers, has integrated gender justice into its work by establishing a Women's Assembly, ensuring parity and applying an intersectional gender lens to analyse issues and develop demands.
4. **Reparations** through the Global North assuming responsibility for the historical causes of the broken global food system and its impacts on women, taking steps to repair the harms caused and building more equitable and sustainable food systems
  - Building climate-resilient food systems will require debt cancellation and countries in the Global North to meet their climate finance obligations. Reforms of agricultural subsidies that hurt farmers in the Global South, regulations to prevent land grabbing for biofuels and discredited carbon off-set projects, and curbs on the financialization of food markets are also essential.

## CHALLENGES TO ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE

Feminists are relentless in demanding climate justice, but face many barriers to accountability.

In 2022, the average level of democracy reverted to a point not seen since 1986.

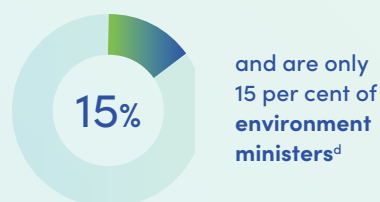
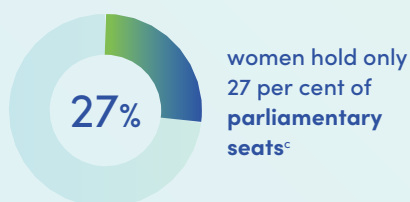
In the past decade:

**34** countries have eroded women's rights to open dialogue

**47** countries have seen declines in media freedom

**30** countries have regressed in the conduct of free and fair elections<sup>a</sup>

Women's representation in parliaments is associated with stronger climate change policies,<sup>b</sup> but globally



Between 2012 and 2022, women's participation in UNFCCC national delegations increased from

**30% to 35%**

but only 20 per cent of delegations were headed by a woman.<sup>e</sup>

In a study of 94 countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), only 26 considered national gender machineries integral to climate change governance.<sup>f</sup>



As of January 2022:

there were at least **3,545** environmental conflicts worldwide.<sup>g</sup>

**842** of them involved women environmental defenders as visible leaders.<sup>h</sup>

In **81** of these conflicts, women environmental defenders were assassinated.<sup>g</sup>



Action is needed to end impunity for violence against human rights defenders, build coalitions, support women's substantive representation and their use of monitoring tools and reinvigorate democratic institutions at all levels.

Sources: <sup>a</sup> V-Dem 2023b. Data covers the decade from 2012–2022; <sup>b</sup> Mavisakalyan and Tarverdi 2019; <sup>c</sup> UN-Women and UNDESA 2023 (26.7%); <sup>d</sup> IUCN 2021a; <sup>e</sup> WEDO 2023a; <sup>f</sup> UNDP 2022b; <sup>g</sup> Tran and Hanacek 2023; <sup>h</sup> EJAtlas database as of 31 January 2022 (likely to be an underestimate, given gaps and frequent bias in media reporting).



# BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE

The gap between the visionary aspirations of feminist climate justice and the sluggish government responses demands bold action to ensure accountability.

There are three major barriers to be overcome:

## 1. **Global challenges, reduced state capacity:**

Combating climate change requires powerful democratic States and a reinvigorated multilateral system at a time when the power and legitimacy of both have been seriously curtailed. In 2022, the average level of democracy reverted to a level not seen since 1986, an era marked by the Cold War and the Berlin Wall.

## 2. **Rights-based versus market-centric solutions:**

Achieving feminist climate justice requires a shift away from prevailing economic models that commodify care and the environment. Yet, implementing climate commitments persistently favours market-based solutions and depoliticized technical fixes, while leaving corporations largely unchecked and/or poorly regulated. A legally binding United Nations convention on business and human rights, as well as regulations to limit corporate lobbying and greenwashing in global governance processes, could go a long way towards creating greater accountability.

## 3. **Fragmentation amidst urgency:**

To avert environmental destruction and biodiversity loss, solidarity across countries, social groups and economic classes is paramount. But colonial legacies, escalating socio-economic inequalities, rising living costs and patriarchal political discourses are deepening fragmentation, pitting disadvantaged groups against each other and hampering collective action. While women have been organizing collectively, building solidarity across social movements, this work is often dangerous.

Despite these challenges, women have been coming together to demand action. They have focused on three avenues to move towards accountability for feminist climate justice.

## Reinvigorating multilateralism and democratic institutions, inclusive of women

- Feminists at national level have been at the forefront of pro-democracy movements. They have made clear the need for inclusive climate planning and implementation to advance climate-resilient development.
- National gender machineries and women's ministries could play an important role in linking policymakers with civil society actors, but so far they have been marginalized from climate policymaking. As of 2021, only 37 countries had conducted comprehensive consultations to define the core climate and gender considerations within their Nationally Determined Contributions.
- Feminists have played a pivotal role in incorporating gender-related language into at least 120 decisions of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and have promoted the inclusion of women in global climate negotiations.
- As advocated by the United Nations Secretary-General, reform of the international financial architecture is needed to ensure it supports climate action, including changes to voting rights and decision-making rules to make them more democratic, representative of countries in the Global South and gender-balanced; and delinking access to resources, such as special drawing rights, from outdated and biased quotas that favour wealthier nations.

## Promoting coalitions and protecting civic space

- Pro-environment coalitions of States, such as the High Ambition Coalition, should be supported in their work to bridge longstanding geopolitical divisions and elevate mitigation ambitions in climate negotiations. Such coalitions were instrumental in the 2015 Paris Agreement and in lobbying for the establishment of the loss and damage fund.
- Feminist movements have formed coalitions with Indigenous groups and environmental movements

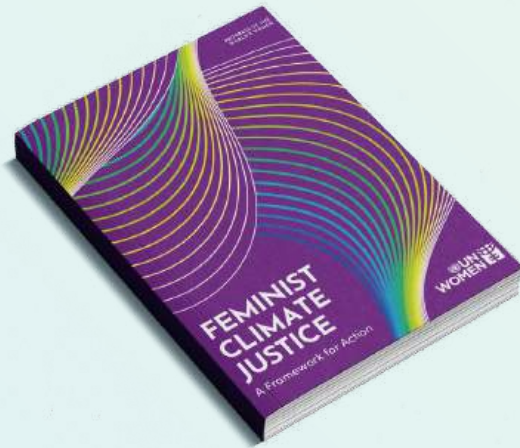


to co-create platforms for justice. For example, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders played a pivotal role in informing and promoting the 2018 regional Escazú agreement. This landmark binding treaty is the first to include explicit provisions to prevent the criminalization of environmental human rights defenders.

### Enhancing bottom-up monitoring

- Accountability tools such as participatory budgeting can help identify systemic failures requiring action and can build community ownership and grassroots oversight. For example, gender-responsive climate budgeting can help allocate resources to address gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities at both local and national levels, including by supporting the diversification of women's livelihoods impacted by environmental degradation. Countries that are taking steps in this direction include Bangladesh, Benin, Indonesia, Nepal and Rwanda.
- Monitoring policy design and implementation is another important pathway to achieve accountability for feminist climate justice. However, effective climate policy monitoring from a gender perspective has proved challenging due to a lack of comparable data on policy actions. To address this, UN-Women is working with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the Kaschak Institute for Social Justice for Women and Girls at Binghamton University on a new gender equality and climate policy scorecard, which aims to compile data on policies and systematically monitor gender-responsive national climate policies.

*Feminist Climate Justice: A Framework for Action* – the main publication with full references – is available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/11/feminist-climate-justice-a-framework-for-action>.



Access the series at: <https://progress.unwomen.org/>

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