

Women’s Leadership in Environmental Management and Climate Change Action

A LITERATURE LANDSCAPE SUMMARY

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Evidence shows that increasing women’s participation and leadership in environmental governance and climate change policy and programming leads to more ambitious and effective actions across scales (*WEDO, 2022; UN Women & International Gender Champions Geneva, 2017*). However, significant gender gaps persist in environment and climate leadership. Women remain underrepresented in key environmental decision-making positions in government, business, and civil society organizations globally, even in countries highly vulnerable to climate change (*OECD, 2022*).

At the international level, women’s participation in UN climate negotiations as national delegates averages around one-third, though it varies widely by country and region (*WEDO, 2022*). Advocacy efforts highlight the need for travel funds, mentorships, and other measures to enhance inclusion of women delegates, especially from developing countries most impacted by climate change. Similarly, a review of governing bodies of UN agencies found gaps in explicit policies, targets, and mechanisms to promote women’s leadership (*UN Women & International Gender Champions Geneva, 2017*).

In transboundary environmental governance, evidence indicates women play key leadership roles at local to national levels, though they lack voice in male-dominated planning processes (*Fauconnier et al., 2018*). Their perspectives are vital for sound natural resource management. In Latin America, recommendations call for women’s agencies to take on more transformative leadership integrating gender equality and women’s empowerment into climate policy and action (*Aguilar Revelo, 2021*).

At national and local levels, civil society argues that policymakers must take gender-responsive, women-centered approaches to climate change, mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction, as modeling by women-focused organizations shows (*IWDA, 2022*). Making social justice central to climate action requires anti-racist, feminist leadership that links policy across housing, health, energy and other sectors (*Stephens, 2020*).

In contexts vulnerable to climate change and conflict, women’s contributions to building climate resilience and peace must be strengthened by addressing barriers to their inclusion in environmental peacebuilding (*Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security et al., 2021*). Research identifies the need to document women’s lived experiences and elevate their strategies and solutions.

Women play vital roles managing households, agriculture, and natural resources, so their participation and leadership are critical for effective climate adaptation and disaster resilience (CARE, 2020; Aryal, 2014). This requires dedicated funding and resources for women's organizations and leaders. Gender data initiatives emphasize the need for indicators tracking women's leadership across climate-vulnerable sectors (World Bank, 2023).

While women disproportionately face climate change impacts, they hold invaluable knowledge and agency. Case studies show women leading community responses to climate variability, disasters, environmental degradation and resource conflicts (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2015). Platforms to share lessons learned can catalyze further leadership. Realizing environmental goals and climate justice requires diverse women's inclusion and empowerment across policy negotiations, program implementation, and activism.

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